

ADVENT MEDITATIONS

THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

OPENING PRAYER

Advent is the time for rousing. We are shaken to our very depths, so that we may wake up to the truth of ourselves. The primary condition for a fruitful and rewarding Advent is renunciation, surrender. We must let go of our mistaken dreams, out conceited poses and arrogant gesture, all the pretenses with which we hope to deceive ourselves and others. If we fail to do this stark reality may take hold of us and rouse us forcibly in a way that will entail both anxiety and suffering.

The kind of awakening that literally shocks our whole being is part and parcel of the Advent idea. A deep emotional experience like this is necessary to kindle the inner light which confirms the blessing and the promise of the Lord. A shattering awakening; that is the necessary preliminary. Life only begins when the whole framework is shaken. There can be no proper preparation without this. It is precisely in the shock of rousing while we are still deep in the helpless, semi-conscious state, in the pitiable weakness of that borderland between sleep and waking, that we find the golden thread which binds earth to heaven and gives the benighted soul some inkling of the fullness it is capable of realizing and is called upon to realize.

We ought not to ignore Advent meditations like these. We have to listen, to keep watch, to let our heart quicken under the impulse of the indwelling Spirit. Only in this quiescent state can the true blessing of Advent be experienced and then we shall also recognize it in other ways. Once awakened to an inner awareness we are constantly surprised by symbols bearing the Advent message, figures of tried and proved personalities that bring out in a most forceful way the inner meaning of Advent and emphasize its blessing.

I am thinking of three in particular--The voice crying in the wilderness, the herald angel, and Mary.

The Voice Crying in the Wilderness -- We live in an age which has every right to consider itself no wilderness. But woe to any age in which the voice crying in the wilderness can no longer be heard because the noises of everyday life drown it -- or restrictions forbid it -- or it is lost in the hurry and turmoil of "progress" -- or simply stifled by authority, misled by fear and cowardice. Then the destructive weeds will spread so suddenly and rapidly that the word "wilderness" will recur to our minds willy-nilly. I believe we are no strangers to this discovery.

Yet for all this, where are the voices that should ring out in protest and accusation? There should never be any lack of prophets like John the Baptist in the kaleidoscope of life at any period; brave people inspired by the dynamic compulsion of the mission to which they are dedicated, true witnesses following the lead of their hearts and endowed with clear vision and unerring judgment. Such people do not cry out for the sake of making a noise or the pleasure of hearing their own voices, or because they envy others the good things which have not come their way on account of their singular attitude towards life. They are above envy and have a solace known only to those who have crossed both the inner and outer borders of existence. These people proclaim the message of healing and salvation. They warn us of our chance, because they can already feel the ground heaving beneath their feet, feel the beams cracking and the great mountains shuddering inwardly and the stars swining in space. They cry out to us, urging us to save ourselves by a change of heart before the coming of the catastrophes threatening to overwhelm us.

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O God, surely enough people nowadays know what it means to clear away bomb dust and rubble of destruction, making the rough places smooth again. They will know it for many years to come with this labor weighing upon them. O, may the arresting voices of the wilderness ring out warning humanity in good time that ruin and devastation actually spread from within. May the Advent figure of St. John the Baptist, the incorruptible herald and teacher in God's name, be no longer a stranger in our own wilderness. Much depends on such symbolic figures in our lives. For how shall we hear if there is none to cry out, none whose voice can rise above the tumult violence and destruction, the false clamor that deafens us to reality.

Second Reading: *Isaiah 40: 1-11*

Meditation/Discussion (Who have been some of the "Voices crying in the Wilderness" in your life?)

The Herald Angel -- Never have I entered on Advent so vitally and intensely alert as I am now. When I pace my cell, up and down, three paces one way and three the other, my hands manacled, an unknown fate in front of me, then the tidings of our Lord's coming to redeem the world and deliver it have a quite different and more vivid meaning. And my mind keeps going back to the angel someone gave me as a present during Advent two or three years ago. It bore the inscription: "Be of good cheer. The Lord is near." A bomb destroyed it. The same bomb killed the donor and I often have the feeling that he is rendering me some heavenly aid. It would be impossible to endure the horror of these times -- like the horror of life itself, could we only see it clearly enough -- if there were not this other knowledge which constantly buoys us up and gives us strength: the knowledge of the promises that have been given and fulfilled. And the awareness of the angels of good tidings, uttering their blessed messages in the midst of all this trouble and sowing the seed of blessing where it will sprout in the middle of the night. The angels of Advent are not the bright jubilant beings who trumpet the tidings of fulfilment to a waiting world. Quiet and unseen they enter our shabby rooms and our hearts as they did of old. In the silence of night they pose God's questions and proclaim the wonders of Christ with whom all things are possible.

Advent, even when things are going wrong, is a period from which a message can be drawn. May the time never come when we forget about the good tidings and promises when so immured within the four walls of our prisons our very eyes are dimmed and we see nothing but grey days through barred windows placed too high to see out of. May the time never come when we no longer hear the soft footsteps of the herald angel, or the cheering words that penetrate the soul. Should such a time come all will be lost. Then indeed we shall be living in bankruptcy and hope will die in our hearts. For the first thing we must do if we want to raise ourselves out of this sterile life is to open our hearts to the golden seed which God's angels are waiting to sow in it. And one other thing: We must ourselves go forth through out these days as a bringer of glad tidings. There is so much despair that cries out for comfort; there is so much faint courage that needs to be reinforced; there is so much perplexity that yearns for reasons and meanings. God's messengers, who have themselves reaped the fruits of divine seeds sown even in the darkest hours, know how to wait for the fullness of harvest. Patience and faith are needed, not because we believe in the earth or in our stars, or in our temperament or our good disposition, but because we have received the message of God's herald angel and have ourselves encountered God's messenger.

Fourth Reading: *Luke 1: 5:17*

Discussion/Meditation (How have "Herald Angels" come to you in time of need?)

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Mary - She is a comforting figure. The fact that the angel's annunciation found a comforting heart ready to receive the Word, and that it grew beyond its earthly environment to the very heights of heaven, is the holiest of all Advent consolations. What use are all the lessons learned through our suffering and misery if no bridge can be thrown from our side to the other shore? What is the point of our return from error and fear if it brings no enlightenment, does not penetrate the darkness and dispel it? What use is it shuddering at the world's coldness, which all the time grows more intense, if we cannot discover the grace to conjure up visions of better conditions?

Authors of legends and fairy tales have always used mothers as a favorite theme for rousing the strongest human feelings. Often mothers are a symbol of the earth's fertility. Behind this symbolism lies a universal hunger and yearning, we all want consolation and comforting. We each at times need to present ourselves before God and seek the trustful security of a mother's heart, to find ourselves back at our roots.

On the grey horizon eventually light will dawn. The foreground is very obtrusive; it asserts itself so firmly with its noise and bustle but it does not really amount to much. The things that really matter are further off -- there conditions are different. The woman has conceived a child, has carried it and has brought forth one new human being -- and thereby the world has passed under a new law. You see, this is not just a sequence of historical events that stand out in isolation. It is a symbol of the new order of things that affects the whole of our life and every phase of our being.

Today we must have the courage to look at Jesus' mother as a symbolic figure. At the core of these times through which we are living are also carried the blessing and mystery of God. They are pregnant times. It is only a matter of waiting and of knowing how to wait until the hour has struck and we will be delivered. Meanwhile we are held close and secure.

Sixth Reading: *Luke 1:46-55*

Meditation/Discussion (How have you been comforted -- spiritually and really -- when you have needed it?)

Advent in three holy and symbolic forms. It is not meant as a flight of fancy but as a message addressed to me and to you, reader, if ever these pages find you. Its purpose is not good prose but an exposition of truth which we must refer to again and again as a standard and a source of encouragement when the burden of our days becomes too heavy and confining.

Let us pray for receptive and willing hearts that the warnings God sends us may penetrate our minds and help us to overcome the wilderness of life. Let us have the courage to take the words of the Messenger to heart and not ignore them, lest those who are our executioners today may at some future time be our accusers for the suppression of truth.

And let us kneel and pray for clear vision, that we may recognize God's messenger when one comes, and willing hearts to understand the words of the message. The world is greater than the burden it bears, and life is more than the total of its days. Golden threads of reality are already shining through; if we look we can see them shining everywhere. Let us never forget this; we must be our own comforters. The one who promotes hope is a person of promise, one of whom much may be expected.

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And once again let us pray for faith in compassion and consolation, the blessings of life symbolized in Jesus' mother. Life has to hold its own against ruthless and tyrannical forces, not only today but at all times. We have the responsibility for consoling not only others but ourselves, for acting compassionately with others and with ourselves. We need to recognize the need for parenting and in turn provide the parental care and guidance for others, not forgetting that we too need nurturing.

Let us have patience and wait in the spirit of Advent for that hour in which it shall be pleasing for God to reveal Godself anew. Often we first meet God in the very darkest hour and that meeting becomes the fruit and mastery of those terrible times. A radiant fulfilment is coming and we can hear the first tentative notes of jubilation. It is not yet a full chorus but only an indication, a hint, far away. But it is drawing nearer. That is all for today, but for tomorrow the angels will joyfully proclaim the event and we shall be happy if we have believed and faithfully trusted in the Advent.

CLOSING PRAYER AND MEDITATION

Final Reading: *Jeremiah 31: 31-34*

ADVENT MEDITATIONS

The Third Week of Advent

OPENING PRAYER

The People Who Are Not at the Crib - Even those who are not there have a message for us and a judgment to give if only to make us realize what it is that keeps usseparated from God. After all, as a people today we are not at the crib either. Yet the emotions aroused by much that we are living through ought certainly to make us want to be there.

Those who were not there include the powerful, the wealthy and the learned leaders of the synogogue -- that is, the powerful heads of the established church.

Matthew 2:16-23

The Powerful - Neither the Roman procurator nor the recognized native rulers made their appearance at the crib to receive ratification of their power. Power can only be genuine and good when it is rooted in the divine. These people possessed power in their own right and used it only to further their own ends. Theirs is the mystery of power. Those who possess power have the implicit duty -- and the opportunity -- to serve as God's deputies. The French, more realistic than we, have two different words, force and puissance (power/strength, power over vs. power to) Puissance conveys the awe inspiring impression of inner power. Power in itself and as the sum total of all the means of enforcing it becomes destructive in the hands of arrogant totalitarian authority and ruins both the one who wields it and the subjects on whom it is exercised. The tyrant in possession of such power is no longer capable of spiritual sensitivity. Tyrants are suspicious of everything that does not fit into the narrow limits of permitted and regulated expression. There was no paragraph in the rules at Jerusalem covering the birth of the child at Bethlehem. Hence the reaction of perplexity and fear and the prompt recourse to the sword. In circumstances like these the subject beings grow timid and cowardly; they accept that their claim to life is cut to the basic minimum of official permission.

Dare we ignore this message and judgment? The history of power in the Western world is onelong story of ruthless force. There is no room in it for the glory of God which is neither safeguarded nor respected. The great are concerned only with their own importance and spend their lives jockeying for position. And the consequences, as far as they concern humanity as a whole are only too obvious. Fear has become a cardinal virtue. This is not said in a spirit of anarchy. But power must regain its proper dimension, allying itself with eternal purpose and genuine mission. Otherwise it will merely evoke counter-action and the ghastly struggle for survival will never end. And as subordinate beings, humans must waken to the inherent sovereignty of their spirits, believing in conscience and their relationships with God.

Meditation/Discussion: How does "power over" control you life and keep you from being what God wants you to be?

Reading: Luke 4:18-19

The Wealthy - There is nothing wrong in having great possessions. But when our possessions rob us of our freedom and make us slaves then they become evil. It was like this at the time of the Nativity, and the palaces and fine houses were not destined to shelter the Lord. Great possessions can and should be a blessing. But the owners of treasure are also people who are afraid of any order of things not

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covered by the official records. It is so now and it was so then -- Our Lord's words on the subject are well known.

A great many hasty judgments have been made in this connection and much prejudice has been based on them -- Marxist socialism, the condemnation of private ownership, and so on. We must keep a sense of proportion. All the same it is clear that the unsolved problem of wealth, of unearned income and so on is one of the themes of our time. In the last century control passed from the hands of the wise and these burning questions no longer came up against the moderating influence of tolerance, wisdom and a sense of duty. Evils that were dealt with by the materialistic society of the nineteenth century were at the mercy of self-interest, expediency, indignation. The highest ideals were lacking and there was palpably no trace of that spiritual attitude based on the divine nature that makes us all free. So it is not surprising that ordinary people's spiritual mechanism has rusted and become practically useless. Therefore those endowed with great possessions cannot be found in the devout circle around the crib. Some are absent because their possessions have robbed them of proper insight, others because the things they covet have made them incapable of any other interest. It is undeniable that every human being is entitled to a living space, daily bread and the protection of the law as a common birthright; these are fundamentals and should not be handed out as an act of charity.

Meditation/Discussion (In what ways do your belongings or search for money keep you from truly living out your faith?)

4th Reading The Learned - Great learning and prayer have little in common. It was so then and is still so today. Learning is besotted and bemused by the brilliance of its own ideas and has an overweeningly high opinion of its own interpretation of the world's affairs. And whenever the world takes a course not laid down in the books it is immediately suspect.

Western thought is inordinately proud of having "grown up" in the last century. It considers itself completely adult and self-possessed. Meanwhile in obedience to its own law it is no longer spreading its wings like an eagle, no longer adventuring to the horizon. It has become a mere appendage to earthbound utility blind and blunted to certain aspects of truth. But human nature is so constituted that even in its most debased and blinded state it still needs to ape God and set itself on a pedestal as if it were divine. Unconsciously it is reaching out towards a state it might be capable of achieving if it were not so in love with itself and forever leading itself and its world into the icy mire of materialism.

No, the learned are not found among those devout souls kneeling round the crib in the stable. They are the types whom later, when Jesus was grown, the Child was to embrace in the lament "Woe, Woe"; but then they did not understand that either. The wise men, those whose prescience came from the heart, knew where they were going and the goal they were looking for. They were capable of adoration.

The thoroughly learned today cannot be bothered with prayer. Should their thoughts ever wander in the direction of the crib they would surround it with signs and symbols, propaganda slogans, culture jargon and so on. They overlook the simple unquestionable truths God has laid down. Clearly the whole destiny of the West is tied up with this problem. A glance into our schools and universities should suffice to prove that the problem of destiny is unsolved.

Meditation/Discussion (Can you sort out what you have been taught from what you know to be real for you? How does your "education" stand in the way of your faith?)

ST. READING The Established Church - The synagogue had no part in the adoration at the manger. The synagogue was in fact one-track minded: it had an expectation and had no time or attention for anything except that clear-cut idea and its hoped-for realization. The books had even foretold that Bethlehem was the place where that realization would come to pass, yet so completely were the priests shrouded in their own shriveled ideas that their senses had become numbed and that numbness prevented their recognizing the signs of their time. No star pointed the way for them, no gleam of intuition lightened their darkness. They were bemused by their own self-sufficiency and heard nothing of the angels' song.

If only this were merely a tale to point a moral. But it is the plain truth; it really happened. The new spirit of Creation flows without interruption through the new Church -- but how much force it requires to achieve its purpose. The officers of the Church have the inner guidance of the Spirit -- but what about the executive departments? And the beaurocratic officials? And the mechanical "believers" who "believe" in everything, in every ceremony, every ritual -- but know nothing whatever about the living God? One has to be very careful in formulating this thought, not from cowardice but because the subject is so awe-inspiring. One thinks of all the meaningless attitudes and gestures -- in the name of God? No, in the name of habit, of tradition, custom, convenience, safety and even -- let us be honest -- in the name of middle-class respectability which is perhaps the very least suitable vehicle for the coming of the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit will go on pouring forth and bringing about its work of renewal but things might have worked more smoothly if there had been no rift, no quarrels, no secession, defamation and suspicion, if the Spirit had founding living organs to work through instead of withered officials. And the obstacles are still there. Creative theology, spiritually conscious worshippers, active, effective love have yet to be achieved. Let us go back to the genuine contact and learn its laws once more; let us regain the capacity to see visions and know intuitively, moved by the Spirit. Let us give free rein to the divine instinct with which we are endowed and climb out of this morass in which we are bogged, emerge from this trance of false security. Then we shall discover the real efficacy of prayer and its power to bless and to heal.

(How does "ritual", "rite" or "churchiness" stand in
MEDITATION/Discussion the way of your faith?)

ST. READING The Crux of the Matter - Now I ought to sum all this up in a pattern of behavior towards which we could be educated so that we can be capable of knowing God once more. But I am desperately short of time. I can hear the jailer already coming down the passage and besides I have no more paper. So the friend for whom these lines are intended, and any others who may one day chance to read them, will have to gather up the ends for themselves. But one thing must be said. I shall be accused of being concerned only with the "natural" life of human beings. I will not attempt to deny or disguise the fact. But God's kindness appeared in one of the Christmas messages. Without a minimum of sound humanity, genuine human dignity, and human culture, no one is capable of making contact with God. We are not even capable of ordinary understanding and behavior.

I am perfectly aware that only extraordinary grace can reawaken us and heal us; I also know that the divine impulse is forever prompting us, yearning to be allowed to do its healing work. To proclaim this is the task of those among us who still have perception and know it for the truth.

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But we will not be denied God's mercy is the law of our salvation. But the main task is to render us capable and willing for the Spirit to do its work. This is even more urgent than the proclamation of the central mystery, for no one can understand this anyway until we have surrendered and opened our hearts to the will of God within us. So it may be that even this shambles in which we now live, this devastation swept by bitter winds of fate, is the destined place and hour of a new holy night, a new birth for humanity seeking God, a new nativity. Darkness shall not frighten us or distress wear us out; we will go on waiting, watching and praying until the star arises.

Meditation/Prayer (Can you dedicate yourself to not letting anything get between you and God?)

Closing Reading: *ISAIAH 55:1-13*

The Prison Meditations of Father Delp, Alfred Delp, S.J. (with Introduction by Thomas Merton) MacMillan, New York, 1963.

The Fourth Week of Advent

MEDITATIONS ON THE VIGIL OF CHRISTMAS

(An excerpt from Father Delp's diary: December 28th: In the course of these last long weeks life has become suddenly much less rigid. A great deal that was once quite simple and ordinary seems to have taken on a new dimension. Things seem clearer and at the same time more profound; one sees all sorts of unexpected angles. And above all God has become almost tangible. Things I have always known and believed now seem so concrete; I believe them but I also live them.

For instance how I used to mouth the words "hope" and "trust". I know now that I used them uncomprehending, like a child. And in doing so I deprived my life of much fruitfulness and achievement, and I also cheated others of many substantial blessings because I was incapable of taking really seriously God's command that we should trust absolutely and wholeheartedly in God. Only one who really believes and hopes and trusts can form any idea of humanity's real status or catch a glimpse of the divine perspective.) He was executed on January 8th.

There has always been a lot of misunderstanding about the feast of the nativity. Superficial familiarity, sentimental creche-making and so on have to some extent distorted our view of the stupendous event the feast commemorates.

The events of history in the past few years have brought home the harsh realities of life as never before. The temptation to make an idyllic myth of Christmas are less in evidence than before. Many who have spent Christmas in dugouts and foxholes that would make the stable at Bethlehem seem cozy by comparison will have little inclination to glamorize the ox and ass. They may even stumble on the idea of asking themselves what really happened that holy night -- was the world made a better, more beautiful place? Did life acquire a blessing because the angels sang Gloria in excelsis, because the shepherds were astounded and hurried to pay homage, because a king lost his nerve and ordered innocent children to be massacred? Yet at this point the questions have already started to run wild -- for this crime took place simply and solely because it was the holy night.

Yet Christians probably never pray more fervently than when they offer up the respirare at the conclusion of the Vigil. We breathe again because the birth of the Only-Begotten will, we trust, ease our burdens. A load has been lifted from our hearts. Life takes on a new meaning because a new perspective has been disclosed, because the decisive moment has been reached again, because the relative security we normally count on has not yet been swallowed up by the uncertainties of abnormal times.

To breathe again - To be honest, I long to be able to breathe again, to be relieved of my troubles. How earnestly I prayed the prayer for speedy deliverance in yesterday's Mass. Each day I have to steel myself for the hours of daylight and each night for the hours of darkness. In between I often kneel or sit before my silent Host and talk over with him the circumstances in which I am. Without this constant contact I should have despaired long ago.

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The question that applies to the whole world applies to me personally and concretely on this feast of the nativity. Is there anything different about celebrating Mass here in this narrow cell where prayers are said and tears are shed and God is known, believed in and called on? At stated hours the key grates in the lock and my wrists are put back into handcuffs; at stated hours they are taken off -- that goes on day after day, monotonously, without variation. Where does the breathing again which God makes possible come in? And the waiting and waiting for relief -- how long? And to what end?

It is necessary to celebrate the feast of the Nativity with great realism, otherwise one's imagination will conjure up magical happenings for which one's sober reason can discover no justification nor prospect. And as a result of that the celebration of the feast could easily lead to bitter disappointment and deep depression. The vigil Mass leads to the necessary restrained, expectant and realistic frame of mind in three ways:

God whose coming we celebrate is and remains the God of promise - At the introit we pray: This day you shall know -- and in the morning you shall see, clearly referring to the coming feast and the connection between it and the vigil. But it also refers to a perpetual state, to the fundamental condition of our life. It is one of the most tragic and disturbing factors of our existence that we may know a great deal and have vast experience behind us and yet fail to find a place of shelter, a secure refuge. We would so like to regard our acquired knowledge as final, to make ourselves at home here and feel secure. But every now and then we grow uncomfortably aware of the fact that our wanderings are not yet over. Again and again the truth we believe we have grasped proves to be merely a prelude, an overture to something that lies beyond, beckoning and leading us onward. And we must go on, must continue our journey if we are to be given life's reward. To call a halt before the end is reached means death, metaphysical and religious ruin.

This "in the morning you shall see" absorbs the wholesome, creative unrest to which we owe all that is genuinely alive in our own makeup. But at what a price. The Lord calls it hunger and thirst after righteousness and one needs to have experienced the agony of counting hours until the next ration of bread is due really to understand what this means and how much is expected of us in this eternal quest.

And the alternative? Indifference, resignation, insensitivity, loss of appetite, the atrophying of the organs, the loss of our spiritual nerve, overstrain and deadly fatigue -- in short one of those fatal wounds through which the lifeblood of so many human beings nowadays is ebbing away. We may think we can escape the curve of tension into which the law has forced us but in the end we come to realize that burdens are part and parcel of the condition of life.

So now at the threshold of Christmas which we like to approach as though it were a kind of earthly paradise, we come to the same motif: you shall know -- you have received tidings: you shall see -- you must be on your way to find real fulfilment in real encounter. Here again we have real tension, the theme of the bow which can only be stretched when the arrow is applied to it.

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We ought to remember that we are approaching the feast of God-made-human, not of humanity rendered divine. The divine mystery takes place on earth and follows that natural course of earthly events. As the epistle so emphatically states: according to the flesh--from the seed of David. It cannot be interpreted any other way. It is an indisputable but incomprehensible fact that God enters our homes, our existence, not only like us but actually as one of us. That is the unfathomable mystery. From this point on the Child is absorbed by history, becomes part of history and shares history's fate. In the darkest cells and the loneliest prisons Christ is there; is met on the high roads and in the lanes. And this is the first blessing of the burden -- Jesus is there to help us bear it. And the second blessing of it is that all we who have to bear it know at once when the strong shoulder is pushed under to relieve the weight. And the third blessing is that since that holy night when divine life and the original pattern of existence was born on earth, strength enabling us to master life has grown from that upsurge of divine vitality in human existence and is reflected in the existence of the community, to which God revealed Godself.

We shall be better able to cope with life's demands if we remain constantly aware of the directions this night provides. Let us continue our journey along the highway of life without allowing ourselves to be deterred or frightened by occasional desolate stretches. A new spirit has entered into us and we will not waver in our belief in the star of the promises or weary of acknowledging the angels Gloria even if we sometimes have tears in our eyes as we join in. Many disasters have been turned into blessings because we have risen above them.

Third Reading:

Meditation/Discussion (How has God/Jesus shown that there was one present whom you could lean upon in trouble. Do you need to do that leaning now? Why? Can others help you experience that ability to find help when you need it?)

God in the Christmas encounter is still the challenging God - The greatest misconceptions all center on the typical Christmas picture of God. Here too is humanity so wrapped up in appearances that the breathtaking reality of the birth of God as a human child scarcely enters our mind and the soul doesn't grasp its significance. The truth is too tremendous to be appreciated unless one concentrates on it fully. Of course the externals -- the sweetly sentimental pictures, the carols, the creches, and so on are a comfort to humanity as a whole and to the individual. But there is a great deal more to the nativity than that. The comfort we derive from the externals is only the symbol of the far greater gifts this event, and the feast commemorating it, bestowed and continue to bestow on us. Since the birth of our Lord humanity has been confirmed in the hope which turns us to God's throne for grace: God is on our side. But this does not mean that God has dethroned Godself any more than it means that our lives have been turned into a primrose path by that stupendous event.

We need to look critically at this tendency to sentimentalize the divine attributes by personifying them in the person of an innocent child or by over-beautifying the figure of the adult Jesus. The glamorizing of the nativity story, the lowering of the whole tone of Christ's life to the level of a baroque sermon full of portentous warnings and grave moralizings has contributed quite

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a lot to the West's present helplessness in the face of conditions that keep it fettered and restrained. Certainly God became human -- a human being among human beings -- but nevertheless God, creator of all the universe. Therefore we, the created being, must approach this God-made-us with reverence and adoration, subjugating ourselves in order to find ourselves -- it is the only way.

The vigil points out how we ought to approach this feast. Whoever enters into the divine way of life automatically comes under divine guidance. That, as far as the worshipper is concerned, means that the nearer we get to God the more we long to return there for it is essentially a homecoming. God's nearness has dynamic power. As worshippers, we may know by the state of unrest into which we are thrown by this attraction just how much we have grasped of the secret relationship between God and us.

And the vigil further prevents our becoming bemused by the over-glamorized picture of the divine Child by pointing out another fundamental relationship between God and us. The collect reminds us suddenly and unexpectedly that the child in fact is already sitting in judgment over our lives. The increased capacity for life which comes from understanding this warning, the awakened sense of responsibility, remains with us long after Christmas is over provided we have entered the vigil in the proper spirit. And if we remember that the divine Child is already engaged in the serious business of judging the world how many of the people who represent the human race today can honestly approach the crib? Most of them don't even want to. The small and narrow door will not admit those who come riding on a high horse. But simple shepherds have no difficulty in getting through. The star leads the regal wise men to it but the arrogance of Jerusalem is thrown into a panic by the Child. How much there is in our lives today that cannot face the Child. How different our individual lives would be if only we realized that the world's supreme hour struck that midnight when Almighty God condescended to come among us as a little child. We should not behave so greedily, so arrogantly, so highhandedly to one another if we did.

Every hour of our Lord's life from the crib to the Cross by which we were redeemed is a judgment on some part of our existence. That is why we are often so defeated and so in trouble. But the last hour was a resurrection, a glorious homecoming, for both Christ and for us. We ought to take the Christ Child very seriously.

Meditation/Discussion: (Silently think of the things which God is judging in your life in light of Jesus' teachings and life. What can you do to change that? How can you become more obedient to the Word made flesh?)

God whose coming we joyfully await is still the God of judgment - It is no easy or light matter to face the scrutiny of the divine Judge. Obedience to the Word which has to be the basis of our lives increases our responsibility. But even that is not the end. Over and above rules are the entirely personal twists and turns of fate through which God intervenes in the lives of individuals. And so often God seems to leave us alone with our burden to cope with our troubles as best we can.

Let us reread the Gospel from a purely human angle -- looking at this episode in their lives from a purely human point of view:

Fourth Reading:

We know how it all ended so it doesn't disturb us, but at the time there must have been a great deal of heartache. Joseph's belief in a trusted human being was shattered -- but what must Mary herself have gone through? She had dedicated herself to God -- her submission was complete and unreserved. She had received the Word in a way no other human being would ever share. And then God became silent. She must have felt society's questioning eyes following her; she must have known the torment Joseph was going through and the blow his sense of justice had received. And God left her alone in this hour with all the weight of her trouble pressing on her. From a purely human point of view what a terrible position to be in.

And what about our own fate? We have heard the promises and believed in the messages and accepted the prophecies. And then something unexpected happens and our life is twisted out of shape -- human life is subject to that sort of thing, even the life of Christians. Ought it to be different in their case? It isn't. And it is precisely when we come up against occurrences like this that our faith is put to the real test. To adhere steadfastly to the Word even when we strike our foot against a stone, even when we feel we are beaten, even when we are fastened in chains and handcuffs -- that is the answer. And that is the answer that will be expected when each of us is questioned at the seat of judgment; no one can escape it. God is posing that very question to us today in a hundred different ways and we have to see to it that we have the right answers. Steadfastness is not an easy virtue to acquire, but it makes us fit to meet our Maker and it opens our eyes to the actual reality of God.

Once we honestly try to acquire it the face of the whole world is changed. The stark features of unavoidable accident, of logical consequence and necessity are softened. The world and life take on a more friendly look -- they seem to assume almost parental compassion. The thousand and one small blessings which God takes delight in showering on humanity begin to reveal God's nearness to us. Outwardly things are just as before and yet something has happened -- there is a new consciousness of God's parental care in those who have stood the test of God's questions. Suddenly we discover that events are not impersonal and universal but that they have more than one meaning. In the personal dialogue between God and us which is the whole point of life, achievements have meanings quite different from those usually attributed to them. And what one person regards as trivial everyday occurrences are to another blessed signs of God's mercy and guidance.

Meditation/Discussion (Out of some difficulty which you may be experiencing, what guidance could God be trying to give you? How, in that problem, could God be speaking to you?)

Fifth Reading:

To breathe again - That brings us back to respirare, the deep breath of relief which can, and should bring ease. Nothing has happened to the world but it is now the ark of God which no storm can overturn, no flood can wreck. Life has not shaken off its laws or lost its tension but the Lord has subdued it, made sense of it all.

The very tensions are harnessed now to increase the strength and power of humanity.

And there is one other thing -- we are no longer on our own. Monologue has never been able to make our lives happy and healthy; we are only genuinely alive when we are engaged in dialogue. All mono-tendencies are evil. But by bringing the God-imposed tensions and burdens into the dialogue the most terrible of all human maladies -- loneliness -- is overcome. From that point there are no more starless nights, no more days of solitary confinement, no more lonely paths or pitfalls without companionship or guidance. God with us. That was the promise, that was what we prayed for and cried out for. In God's own way, in the natural course of things, far more simply but also far more effectively than we could ever have imagined, God came to us as our ally.

We must not try to shirk the burdens imposed on us. They are God's way of communicating with us and they are God's blessing. Whoever is true to life, however hard and barren it may seem at the moment, will discover within fountains of real refreshment. The world will give you more than you ever imagined possible. The silver threads of God's mystery will begin to sparkle visibly in everything around you and there will be a song in your heart. Your burdens will turn to blessings because you will recognize them as coming from God and welcome them as such.

God becomes human but humanity does not become divine. The human order remains unchanged with the same obligations. But it has acquired a blessing and we have grown in stature, have become stronger, mightier. Let us trust in life because this night will pass and a new day will dawn. Let us trust in life because we do not have to live through it alone. God is with us.

Meditation/Discussion (What are some of ways you are aware that God is with you? Can you share with each other some of the experiences when God's presence has been made manifest to you?)

Final Reading:

Closing Prayer

ADVENT MEDITATIONS

These meditations are drawn from a book by Father Alfred Delp, S.J. who was executed by the Nazis in Germany in 1945. Just before his death, Father Delp wrote a diary and a series of Advent meditations which were smuggled out of his prison page by page.

Opening Prayer

First Reading: Life with God and in God has its own laws and we cannot discover what they are from a reference book. Yet the conditions for their fulfilment are very straightforward and clear-cut -- less obscure than those of the ten commandments. All the same the thin thread on which they depend, the thread which unites the personal Thou of God with the personal I of the created being, can only be spun when they are being fulfilled.

The bridge linking the human with the divine has a very definite architecture. The foundations are God's affair. In God's all-embracing omnipotence there is a reaching out to humanity in a thousand different ways. To penetrate God's mysteries, to prayerfully and reverently become aware of God, is one of the highest exercises of the human mind and we are most likely to find the key to God's perpetual, relentless, compassionate, gracious reaching-out toward us in the lives of those we call saints. But the pattern which God has set for a relationship with humanity is not our present concern. If that were my only pre-occupation I should simply be satisfying a pious but very ordinary curiosity in spite of the exalted subject. But in order to get anywhere I must probe much more deeply, as indeed I am trying to do. It is a question of the fundamental conditions we must achieve in our own personal lives -- what we have to do is draw the bowstring taut and release the arrow so that the creative dialogue may begin.

I am not here casting the least doubt on the dogmatic teaching of the divine omnipotence and its goodwill toward humanity. There is no hint of doubt of the operation of grace, of God's goodness or of the merit of good deeds and decisions by which we confirm our attitude toward our Maker. But within this framework we have certain liberties and responsibilities and these are the crux of the matter. It is here that mere curiosity is converted into existential thought about the mystery of the success -- or failure -- of one's life.

To take an example: How is it that the most eloquent, logical, well-prepared sermon may produce response in some and leave others unmoved? How is it that whole generations and periods can exist in complete ignorance of, or without response to, the idea of God's creative immanence as though they were incapable of receiving the divine impulse? How is it that there are people in all periods of history who remain unmoved by the greatest miracles, by the most convincing proofs of providential guidance, by the severest penalties, or by the most inexorable strokes of divine justice?

Obviously this is more than merely an interesting theological or philosophical question -- it is very pertinent to our fate today. It sums up everything and on the attitude we adopt to it depends whether we are going to place ourselves once again under God's grace or whether, on the contrary, we are going to continue this miserable dance of death to the bitter end.

Second Week of Advent - 2

It comes down to this -- and there is no escape -- to which order will humanity give allegiance? Are we prepared to promote conditions in which the living contact with God can be re-established? For our lives have become Godless to the point of complete vacuity. God is no longer with us in the conscious sense of the word. God is denied, ignored, excluded from every claim to have a part in our daily life. We have ceased to admit God to our lives, we behave as if we no longer need God, and what is worse, we have actually become incapable of being God-conscious. It is a terrible thing to say about this modern world but as far as I can see it is true. We don't even have to look very far for proof of it -- there is sufficient evidence in the things that are happening every day, and pious horror at the state of the world will not help us in any way. The law to which our lives are subject which has brought about this state of affairs has already made our existence a reproach, reduced the world to rubble and ashes, to carnage and destruction. Now our most urgent concern is how to overcome the inner misery and seal off the source of this external chaos.

Christmas is the mystery of contact with God, fundamentally and actually. Those who are part of the approach to it can show us the human requirements which will make it possible for us once more to converse with God, and the conditions necessary if we are to re-establish contact with God.

Three different kinds of approaches are suggested by the Christmas mystery. First, there is the historical sequence of events recalled by the feast; secondly, there is the liturgical reconstruction of the mystery; and third, there is the silent yet eloquent participation of all present. Even the empty places have speech of their own and a message for us all.

Second Reading: Luke 1: 26-35

THOSE ROUND THE CRIB

We are familiar with the crib figures inside the stable or making their way to it. And on that journey to the stable they all have something significant to say to us about the mystery of life and the everyday world. Mary, Joseph, the Angels, the Shepherds, the Wise Men; these are the people gathered around the Child. Let us seek their message and learn their judgment on our own lives.

Third Reading: Let us put aside, for the moment, the venerated figure of the Blessed Virgin as such. It would be impossible to discuss that holy figure in one short paragraph; as "our Lady" she is a theme with an endless and perpetual message. But here let us think of her simply as the young girl, Mary, kneeling humbly before the manger in which lies the child she has just given us. She has her own message, a few words to offer us in the turmoil to which the estrangement between our benighted generation and the divine mystery has thrown us.

The fact that this night of nights brought forth the Light, that Mary kneels before the Christ, that motherhood and the grace of compassion have become a law of our life, that the ice of our inner solitude can be broken and melted by healing warmth, all this became possible because the maid Mary yielded of her own free choice to the inner prompting of God's voice. Her secret is self-surrender and willing acceptance, offering herself to the point of complete obliteration of her personal will.

Second Week of Advent -3

That is both the message and the judgment of us. As a generation we are completely wrapped up in ourselves; we are always concerned with our self-fulfillment, our self-realization, our living conditions, and so on. Everything is organized for our self-gratification. And precisely because of this we are getting progressively poorer and more miserable. Mary's decision was complete surrender to God, and it is the only thing that can lead to human fulfillment. Hers is the decision that obeys the law of life.

Discussion/Meditation: (Where have you been obedient/needed to be obedient but rejected it?)

MAT. 1:18-13 Luke 2:1-7

Fourth Reading: Joseph - He is the man on the outskirts, standing in the shadows, quietly waiting, there when wanted and always ready to help. He is the man in whose life God is constantly intervening with warnings and visions. Without complaint he allows his own plans to be set aside. His life is a succession of prophecies and dream messages, of packing up and moving on. He is the man who dreams of setting up a quiet household, simply leading a decent home life and going about his affairs, attending to his business and worshipping God, and who, instead, is condemned to a life of wandering. Beset with doubts, heavy-hearted and uneasy in his mind, his whole life disrupted, he has to take to the open road, to make his way through an unfriendly country finding no shelter but a miserable stable for those he holds most dear. He is the one who sets aside all thought of self and shoulders his responsibilities bravely -- and obeys.

His message is willing obedience. He is the person who serves. It never enters his mind to question God's commands; he makes all the necessary preparations and is ready when God calls. Willing unquestioning service is the secret of his life. It is his message for us and his judgment of us. How proud and presumptuous and self sufficient we are! We have crabbed and confined God within the pitiable limits of our obstinacy, our complacency, our opportunism, our mania for "self-expression." We have given God -- and with that everything that is noble and spiritual and holy -- only the minimum of recognition, just as much as would serve to flatter our self-esteem and further our self-will. Just how wrong this is life itself has shown us since in consequence of our attitude we have come to abject bondage which forces the individual to sink his/her identity in the common mass whether he/she wants to or not. The prayer of St. Paul -- do with me what thou wilt -- the quiet readiness to serve of the man Joseph, could lead us to a truer and more genuine freedom.

Discussion/Meditation (What is God asking you to do? What is standing in the way?)

Fifth Reading: The Angels - Not the plaster images made by us, but spirits of a higher order of existence identified with freedom, loyalty, wisdom and love. We meet them in the opening scene on the plain of Bethlehem singing hymns of joy and praise. But that is not the mystery or the law they represent -- that is their fruit and reward. They bring tidings, they announce God's mystery and summon the listeners to the adoration from which they themselves have risen. Their mystery is that they represent the afterglow of the divine reality they proclaim.

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That is their message and their judgment of us. For a long time there have been no great spirits among us. They have dwindled and died out because gifted people have themselves broken the laws of the spirit. For the last hundred years intellectualism has been obsessed by the glorification of the self, as if truth and reality ought to consider it an honor to be perceived and recognized by such marvelous individuals. Spirit is no longer regarded as the living reflection of a higher life. Perception and awareness now pose as spirit itself. Dozens of prophets kindle new lights each with their own messages, their own ideas, but with no notion of mission or dedication -- that would be an offense against the autocracy and autonomy of genius. That is why for a very long time there have been no communications worth listening to. We have had rare messengers of glad tidings singing paeans of praise. When such a voice has been raised publicly it has seemed illusory or has come from agonies of suffering -- an indication of the depths of our soul sickness.

Adoration, perception, proclamation; this is the cycle that represents the life of the spirit. Adoration prepares the soul for perception, since it loosens the tensions and dispels obstacles. The message once perceived enriches the soul, fulfilling its innermost needs and desires, but the proof is in the unfolding of life itself. Let us return to praising God, to proclaiming God joyfully, and then we shall find words that are significant and valuable. We shall see visions again and penetrate mysteries. Insight and decision and the message of the spirit will again become matters of importance, pushing aside the empty show and the bombast of "presentation" which has so much influence today.

Discussion/Meditation (What glad tidings of God's presence in your life are you able to share?)

Sixth Reading: Luke 2: 8-18

Seventh Reading: The Shepherds - They are symbols of a type. That they happened to be shepherds is unimportant -- they might equally have been farmers or hedge-crawling tramps who spend their nights in the open. But they had to be people capable of registering wonder, so I very much doubt whether they could have been the products of this mechanical age. They had to be people whose hearts still warmed to the recollection of the old promises. People, therefore, whose lives still had wide horizons from which the light of intuition and a thousand forebodings of spiritual realities were not excluded. People who were still able to believe in miracles. People upright and healthy enough to accept facts as facts, even when the mathematical calculations and the results of their experiments pointed to the contrary. Their secret lay in their purity of heart; their lively wakefulness of soul, their instant readiness to respond to the call. And underneath all this lay the fact that their lives still held desire and expectation; they longed for the fulfillment of the promises they remembered and implicitly believed.

That is their message for us and the standard they judge us by. As a type, people like these simple shepherds no longer exist. I am not referring to the profession or occupation, but simply to their character, to that wakeful readiness to accept miracles, that genuine inner prompting which altogether overshadowed self. The astonishing instinctive confidence which expects a miracle springs from the inner relationship between the yearning of humanity and the promises of God. The type is no longer with us. The world is full of miracles

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but no one sees them; our eyes have lost the power to perceive them. God's messengers would take a hand in our affairs more frequently if only our hearts could recapture the rhythm that calls them forth. Of all the messages, this is the most difficult to accept. We find it hard to believe that people of active faith no longer exist. If we can revive faith in all its strength this whole world will change.

Meditation/Discussion: (How can you make your faith more active, more vital -- more real.)

Eighth Reading: Matthew 2:1-10

Ninth Reading: "The Journey of the Magi" T.S. Eliot

Tenth Reading: The Wise Men - Whether they were really kings or just local eastern chieftains or learned astrologers is not in the least important. Their hearts were filled with wisdom and the aspirations of their people, and that is what really concerns us. Only those people of the highest type could have undertaken such a journey for such a purpose. They brought all the longing of their nations with them to the place of the encounter for its fulfilment. Through the desert by way of royal palaces, the libraries of the learned, and the counsel chambers of the priests -- and they ended their journey at last at a manger in a poor stable.

Here again we have a distinct type. The secret of these people is as plain to us as is the case of the shepherds. They are people with clear eyes that probe things to their very depths. They have a real hunger and thirst for knowledge. I know what that means now. They are capable of arriving at right decisions. They subordinate their lives to the end in view and they willingly journey to the ends of the earth in quest of knowledge, following a star, a sign, obeying an inner voice that would never have made itself heard but for their hunger and the intense alertness that hunger produces. Such people are regal in every impulse; they can rise above every situation even when it involves great suffering. The compelling earnestness of their quest, the unshakeable persistence of their search, the royal grandeur of their dedication -- these are their secrets.

And it is their message for us and their judgment of us. Why do so few ever see the star? Only because so few are looking for it. People often resolve to do things and then trivial, more pressing preoccupations get in the way. At the time of the nativity the world had already been under firm control for a thousand years. Everything was well organized and things were getting better every day! We have been saying this for so long nowadays that our middle-class complacency has become sated with banal truisms and at last is forcing us to ask a few questions. But we are still at the perplexed and puzzled and frustrated stage; we have not yet reached the point where these questions set up a sense of inner compulsion and urgency. The star which could light the way is still invisible to our half-closed eyes.

What are we looking for anyway? And where will we find a genuine yearning so strong that neither fatigue, nor distance, nor fear of the unknown nor loneliness nor ridicule will deter us? Only such a passionate desire can prompt the persistence which is content to kneel even when the ultimate goal turns out to be a simple stable. Those capable of such dedication penetrate to the heart of

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things and understand why that should be the outcome. A thousand secret longings of the spirit and the heart have paved the way for faith and sanctified them for the act of adoration.

Meditation/Discussion (What are you looking for? Would you settle for finding it in a stable?)

Closing Prayer

THE ADVENT SEASON

The Meaning of Advent

Advent, a season of four Sundays, opens the church year. The season begins on the Sunday closest to St. Andrew's Day, November 30. The observance of Advent originated in France during the fourth century. The duration of the season varied from four to seven weeks until the Bishop of Rome in the sixth century set the season at four weeks. In ancient times Advent was strictly observed: every Christian was required to attend church services and fast daily.

The word, Advent, consists of two Latin words: *ad* — *venire*, "to come to." Advent's message is that God in Christ is coming to the world. This coming may be:

1. *A past experience.* God did come in Christ at Christmas. The prophets' promise was fulfilled in the Babe.
2. *A present experience.* God may come to you this Christmas in terms of rebirth, either for the first time, or a renewed birth in deeper dimensions of reality.
3. *A future experience.* Christ will return unpredictably at the end of the world. "He shall come again with glory to judge the quick and the dead."

The Message of Advent

Since Advent promises the sure coming of the Lord, its message is "prepare." The Lord is coming whether the world is ready or not. For those unprepared, his coming means judgment. For those ready for his coming, it means salvation.

How does Advent suggest that we prepare?

1. *Repentance* — forsake the sins of the world for a godly way of life.
2. *Prayer* — pray for the coming of Christ, for he shall save.
3. *Patience* — his coming may be delayed. Watch and wait, for his coming may be sudden.

The Mood of Advent

1. *Expressed in color.* The mood of Advent is expressed in the liturgical color, violet. It depicts a feeling of quiet dignity, royalty, and repentance. Violet was the traditional color of a king's robe: the coming Christ is King of kings. Advent, like Lent, is a time for solemn and sober thought about one's sins, leading to repentance. It denotes a quiet time for watching, waiting, and praying for Christ to come again, either personally or universally. An alternate color for Advent is blue, the color of hope.

2. *Solemnity and sobriety.* Advent is a time to become aware of one's sins. Traditionally, Advent is a penitential season, originally known as the "Winter Lent." This mood of sobriety is expressed not only in the liturgical color, violet, but in the music of Advent hymns like "O Come, Emmanuel." During Advent choirs may omit processions or have "silent processions." Weddings in this season are discouraged. Christmas carols and decorations are often delayed until Christmas Eve.

3. *Joy in hope.* Advent stresses not so much fulfillment as anticipation of fulfillment: the Lord is coming! Christians have great expectations of Christ's coming again. As a family looks forward to a son returning from a war and as a bride anticipates her wedding day, so a Christian looks forward with joy to Christ's coming. Yet, this is a different kind of joy — joy of hope amid solemnity. It is the quiet joy of anticipation and not the joy of celebration of a past event. This type of joy is expressed in the Advent hymns: "Joy to the World, the Lord is come(ing)," and "O Come Emmanuel . . . Rejoice, Rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel."

The Observance of Advent

Increasingly the church is beginning to observe Advent seriously as a vital and necessary time of preparation for a meaningful, spiritual Christmas. This observance is expressed in various ways:

The sheep and the goats will be divided. Does this suggest that at the Return, half will be saved? Why not all? Apparently, universalism was not in Jesus' mind.

3. *Ready (v. 44).* To be ready for the Parousia is a "must". Not to be ready is to be lost just as the people in Noah's day were not ready with boats for the flood. A commercial says, "Delta is ready when you are." This is not the case with Jesus' return. He is not waiting for us to be ready. Whether we are ready or not, he is coming. Not to be ready spells eternal disaster. What does it mean to be "ready"? To be ready for the end is to live daily in a state of grace. If we are always reconciled to God by faith in Christ, it does not matter when Christ will return.

Lesson 1 Isaiah 2:1-5

1. *Latter (v. 2).* Isaiah tells us what will happen in the "latter" days. This refers to the end of the world. We may be living in the "latter" days now. According to today's scientists, we are close to a nuclear holocaust that would spell doom for the world. In January 1984, on the advice of forty-seven scientists, the doomsday clock was set ahead one minute to three minutes before midnight. We are living on the edge of extinction.

2. *All (v. 2)* In the latter days "all the nations" will see God on the highest mountain on earth. God will be the highest value and the center of the universe. They will come to God to receive his instruction how to live. This will result in international peace. The significance of "all" is that world peace depends upon "all" coming to God? Peace is not a unilateral project. Will it be possible to get "all" nations to come to God? If they are to come at the end-time, why not now? Here is one good reason for the church's overseas missionary program.

3. *Between (v. 4).* When the nations gather on the mountain of God, there will be judgment. Usually we think of judgment as punishment. Not in this case: the word, "between", indicates that God will settle the disputes among the nations. He will judge justly and all nations will be satisfied. The result is that no nation will have reason to go to war to right a wrong.

Lesson 2 Romans 13:11-14

1. *Night (v. 12).* According to Paul, we are living in the "night" of this pre-Parousia time. But, he believed that the night is far spent. It is time to get awake to the new day of Christ's return. Night is the time to sleep and since the dawn is here, we need to get awake to greet the dawn. Moreover, evil is associated with darkness. To live in the day, we need to get rid of our evil ways.

2. *Day (v. 12).* The "day" is associated with Christ's return. Jesus said he was the light of the world. With him comes the light of a new day. Righteousness is allied with the light. We are to live in the light of his truth and peace. Therefore, we are children of the light living in a dark world of sin. But, when Christ comes, there will be no more night.

3. *Put on (v. 14).* When Augustine heard a child's voice say, "Take and read", he opened his Bible and read this verse. Obediently, he "put on" Christ and he became one of our greatest Christians. To "put on" means to be incorporated into Christ so that one is "a man in Christ". To be ready for the Parousia, we put on Christ so that in us Christ confront himself. We are his people. He is one of us. To be properly dressed for the Parousia, we are to put on Christ's robe of righteousness. This calls for a human response. Christ is coming. We are to be ready by putting on Christ. This we do at baptism.

Preaching Possibilities

Preaching During Advent

1. Purpose of Advent.

Advent is a period of preparation. We preach during Advent to prepare our people:

For a true celebration of the Incarnation.

For the Parousia.

For a rebirth of Christ at Christmas.

If Advent is not observed as a time of preparation and if Christmas celebration is substituted for Advent, then:

We become tired of Christmas when Christmas arrives.

We have nothing special to celebrate on Christmas because we have been celebrating for four weeks.

We are not spiritually ready for Christ to be reborn in us at Christmas. Therefore, for the good of the people, preachers will insist upon a strict observance of Advent in their congregations and will preach on Advent themes.

THE EPIPHANY SEASON

A History of Epiphany

Next to Easter, Epiphany is the oldest season of the church year. In Asia Minor and Egypt, Epiphany was observed as early as the second century. The Festival of the Epiphany fell and still falls on January 6. It was observed as a unitive festival — both the birth and baptism of Jesus were celebrated at this time.

January 6 was chosen as Epiphany Day because it was the winter solstice, a pagan festival celebrating the birthday of the sun god. In 331 B.C. the solstice was moved to December 25, but January 6 continued to be observed. Christians substituted Epiphany for the solstice. The emphasis was upon the re-birth of light. In keeping with this time, the First Lesson for Epiphany Day is appropriate: "Arise, shine; for your light has come."

The unitive Festival of Epiphany was divided when December 25 was chosen as the birthday of Jesus. The church in the East continued to celebrate Epiphany in terms of the baptism of Jesus while the Western church associated Epiphany with the visit of the Magi. For the East the baptism of Jesus was more vital because of the Gnostic heresy claiming that only at his baptism did Jesus become the Son of God. On the other hand, to associate Epiphany with the Magi is appropriate, for the Magi did not get to Bethlehem until a year after Jesus' birth. By this time the holy family was in a house rather than in a stable. Consequently, the Magi could not have been a part of the manger scene as is popularly portrayed in today's Christmas scenes and plays. The new lectionary and calendar combine the two by placing the visit of the Magi on Epiphany Day and the Baptism of Jesus on Epiphany 1.

The Name of Epiphany

In the church year Epiphany Day is a major festival, similar to Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. In spite of this, more churches ignore January 6 as the Day of Epiphany because it usually falls on a weekday. For Roman Catholics it is a day of obligation to attend Mass.

The name "Epiphany," means "Manifestation." The light manifests itself in the darkness, God reveals himself in Jesus, and the glory of God is seen in Jesus. In the course of history Epiphany was known by other names: Feast of the Manifestation, Feast of Lights, Feast of the Appearing of Christ, Feast of the Three Kings, and The Twelfth Day.

The Season of Epiphany

Six out of seven years the Festival of the Epiphany falls on a weekday. The Sundays after January 6 are entitled "Sunday after the Epiphany."

Epiphany is an accoridian season. The number of weeks it is observed depends upon the date of Easter. If Easter comes early, the season is short; if it is late, the season of Epiphany is long. In early times the length of the Epiphany season ranged from three to ten weeks. From the sixth century, Epiphany was restricted to six Sundays at the most. In the Eastern church it was the custom to announce on Epiphany Day the upcoming date of Easter. The length of the season depended on the announced date.

Now the Epiphany season extends from six to nine Sundays. With the appearance of the new lectionary and calendar in 1970, the season was lengthened to a possible nine weeks because the former pre-Lenten season of three Sundays was made a part of Epiphany.

The Color of Epiphany

The color used in the paraments denotes the mood and meaning of the season. White is used for three Sundays: Epiphany Day, The Baptism of our Lord (Epiphany 1), and Transfiguration. White is used for these three big days because it is a time of celebration. White expresses light, glory, victory, and celebration.

Green is used on the Sundays other than the above three. Green is the color of growth. During Epiphany we are to grow into a fuller realization of the nature of Christ as the Son of God. Sunday after Sunday there is growth in God's revealing his glory in Jesus.

The Meaning and Message of Epiphany

1. *The Epiphany Star* — Epiphany is associated with the star that led the Wise Men to the manger. The Epiphany star is a five-pointed star representing the Incarnation. It is not a six-pointed star, for this is the star of David, representing the Old Testament with its prophecies. It is not a seven-pointed star which is the star of perfection. Nor is it an eight-pointed star which stands for regeneration and is associated with baptism.

The purpose of the star of Bethlehem was to guide men to Christ. The star is help from above in bringing us to Christ. This is one reason why Epiphany is the time for the church's emphasis upon evangelism.

The star also guides us into the truth of this new-born child in the manger. We are led to an ever-deepening understanding of the nature of Jesus. We are to come eventually to see that Jesus is God's Son as stated at his baptism, "You are my beloved son." Just before the Transfiguration, Peter gets the insight, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Epiphany ends on the mountain of Transfiguration with God again saying that Jesus is his beloved Son. One purpose of Epiphany is to bring people to this same conviction as preparation for Lent, for the meaning of the cross is in the fact that the man on the cross is "the Lamb of God."

2. *The Epiphany Candle* — Another symbol of the season is the candle which sheds its light into a dark world. Christ is the light of the world. He comes into the world as a baby, a small, frail candle. It is the nature of light to scatter and annihilate the darkness. Light brings enlightenment to mankind, resulting in vision and insight. Because of light, there is manifestation and revelation. During Epiphany we see the light of God in Jesus. He reveals, shows, manifests God. Light has certain characteristics. It is a *given* light. The light comes from God, from the star. Man is not the light. At best he can only reflect the light. It is a light that grows in intensity. The candle grows and grows until it becomes as bright as the sun. Throughout Epiphany the light of God's glory is seen increasingly in Jesus until the Transfiguration when his clothes and face are as bright as the sun. You may think of it in terms of concentric circles: a small circle around the flame of the candle until the last circle is as wide as the world. The baby Jesus grows to a mature man of thirty when he is seen as the Son of God. A third characteristic of light is that it *gives itself*. The candle gives light only by virtue of its burning itself up. Light to be light must give, expend, and die to self. At the end of Epiphany we see the light of Christ, at its brightest, but it burns itself out on the cross, only to be re-kindled on Easter.

Epiphany and the Church

1. *A time of worship* — Epiphany is a season of worship because it deals with the glory of God manifested in Jesus. The season begins with the Wise Men's coming to worship the newborn king. The season ends with the worship experience on Mount Transfiguration. When people see Jesus as God's Son, they instinctively fall down to worship him as Lord.

2. *A Time to Witness* — Epiphany is the season of light, and light shows and reveals. The light burns so that all might see the truth and the way to God. It is the time for emphasis upon evangelism, the telling of the good news, the spreading of the light of Christ in a dark world. Christ is the light and Christians reflect that light in the world. They are light-bearers, and they are to go through life lighting candles.

3. *A Time to Win* — The universal Christ is the center of Epiphany. This is the teaching of Epiphany Day with the coming of the Gentile kings to worship Jesus as Lord. The light of Christ knows no end; it goes to the ends of the earth. He is the light to lighten the Gentiles. The church goes about her business of winning the world for Christ. The light of Christ is not merely to shine on Christians but through them to the salvation of human-kind. During this season the church places emphasis upon the cause of world missions. It is the outreach time of the church.

THE LENTEN SEASON

The Lenten season may not be the longest season in the church year but it is one of the most important seasons, if not the most important season of the year. It is a time for spiritual preparation through repentance and growth in faith for Easter. It is the time of the church year when the passion and death of the Savior come into focus. It begins with a special day of repentance, Ash Wednesday, and ends in the depth of sorrow and tragedy on Good Friday. The name of the season, Lent, does not reflect the mood or message of the season. It is an old Anglo-Saxon word *Lencten* or *Lencthen*, which means the lengthening of the days as spring appears. To preach meaningfully and properly, a preacher needs to know the message of Lent and feel its mood and spirit.

Development of the Season

Lent as a period of forty days came into being as a result of a long period of development. Originally in the first century Lent was only a period of forty hours in keeping with the forty hours Jesus' body was in the tomb. The forty-hour observance ended with an Easter service at 3 a.m. Later the forty hours grew into six days during the third century. The six days were not the last week in Lent but an extension of the forty hours. These six days were known as Holy Week, days of strict abstinence. Holy Week observance began in Jerusalem during the fourth century. Services were held on the appropriate day at the places where special events took place during the last week of Jesus' life: the Upper Room, Gethsemane, Pilate's Court, etc. When Holy Week was observed in the West, they substituted the stations of the cross for the actual places in Jerusalem. Rome placed special emphasis upon the triduum: Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter. In the fourth century, the days of Holy Week were designated:

- Palm Sunday — entry into Jerusalem
- Monday — the cleansing of the temple
- Tuesday — The Discourse on the Mount of Olives
- Wednesday — Judas agreement
- Maundy Thursday — Upper Room meeting
- Good Friday — Calvary
- Saturday — the rest in the tomb

The six days grew into thirty-six days, as a tithe of the 365 days of the year. By approximately 731, the time of Charlemagne, four days were added to the thirty-six to make the present season of forty days. The four days consisted of Ash Wednesday to the First Sunday in Lent. The number forty was a popular and meaningful number: Jesus was tempted for forty days in the wilderness, Moses fasted forty days on Sinai, Elijah fasted forty days on the way to the mountain of God, and the Israelites spent forty years in the wilderness.

Sundays were never a part of Lent. We speak of the Sundays *in* Lent, not *of* Lent. The Sundays are known by their Latin names which come from the first Latin word of Introit: *Invocabit*, *Judica*, etc. However, the Lenten emphasis spilled over into the Sunday services in terms of the use of the penitential color, violet, and the dropping of the *Alleluia* and the *Gloria in Excelsis*.

This duration of Lent is not universal. The Eastern Orthodox church extends Lent over an eight-week period. Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday are not considered a part of Lent and are exempted as fast days.

The Date of Lent

Lent begins forty-six days before Easter in spite of the fact that Lent is a season of forty days. This is due to the fact that Sundays are not a part of Lent. When Lent begins, depends upon the date of Easter. In 325 the church decided that Easter would fall on the first Sunday after the full moon which occurs on or after March 21.

Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent. The name "Ash Wednesday," was given by Pope Urban II in 1099. Prior to this, the first day of Lent was known as "Beginning of the Fast." The day was set aside as a special day of repentance and as the opening of a season of repentance. "Ash" symbolized the repentance called for. Priests had the custom of sprinkling ashes on the heads of the faithful as they said, "Remember thou art dust and to dust thou shalt

return." The ashes came from the burned palms of the previous Palm Sunday. To this day, Roman Catholics on Ash Wednesday receive a smudge of ashes on their foreheads. Protestants dropped the custom because they felt it contradicted the Gospel for Ash Wednesday: "And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen of men." (Matthew 6:16-21)

Shrove Tuesday is the day before Ash Wednesday. "Shrove" referred to the shriving or cleansing of their sins by going to confession on this day. On the other hand, it was a day of feasting and for carnival. The French called it "Mardi Gras." The Germans had "Fasching" or "Fasch Nacht." It was a time to use up their store of fat which was forbidden during Lent. Thus, many Germans used up the fat by making doughnuts on Shrove Tuesday, and the English specialized in pancakes.

The Past Observance of Lent

In past centuries Lent was strictly observed and was a very meaningful season of the church year.

1. It was a time of preparation. Originally, Lent was the six-week period to prepare candidates for baptism at Easter. During this period of examination, instruction, penitence, and prayer, the candidates proved their worthiness for the sacrament of baptism. When Christianity was legalized in 325, Lent became a period of preparation for the entire people of God.

2. In the past, Lent was a period of penitence. It was a time for mourning, solemnity, and sadness. A hymn for Holy Week says, "to come and mourn with me awhile." The mood is expressed in the penitential color, violet, for this season, the same color as Advent. To remind the faithful of the nature of the season, a violet veil was hung between the nave and the chancel. Often the altar cross was veiled in violet as a reminder of the penitential character of the season. In keeping with this somber mood, the "Alleluia" and the "Gloria in Excelsis" were omitted from the liturgy. Weddings during Lent were forbidden. Organs were stopped. Public entertainment was outlawed. Often royalty during Lent dressed in black. Lent was a time to be sorry for one's sins. It was also a time for the re-living of the sufferings of Christ. When one's Savior is on his way to death in your behalf, it is most unseemly to be frivolous and gay.

3. Fasting as a means of spiritual discipline was a part of past Lenten observance. From the time of the Apostles, Friday, the day of Jesus' death, was a day of fasting. During Holy Week, Good Friday and Holy Saturday were days of fasting. In the fourth century, fasting was extended to the entire period of Lent.

Fasting was taken seriously. There was abstinence from meat, dairy products, and eggs for the period of Lent. Fasting meant only one meal per day and the rest of the day one existed on water. In the Middle Ages the fast was relaxed to the extent that lunch was permitted. At the time of the Reformation, many Protestants dropped fasting as being "Popish." Some Protestants like John Wesley practiced fasting as a discipline, but if it were practiced, it was on a voluntary basis. For most Protestants, fasting was more of a token than a real denial of food.

The purpose of fasting was twofold. It was for personal discipline and for participation in the sufferings of Christ who in this season was on his way to Jerusalem to suffer and die. The second purpose of fasting was to render some service through fasting. There was a positive side to fasting; it was not only for personal benefit. Pope Leo I in 460 said, "What we forego by fasting is to be given as alms to the poor."

4. Lent was a time for special prayer. During Lent, devout Christians were concerned about the development of their spiritual lives. They gave extra time and effort to personal and public prayer. The traditional symbol for Lenten prayer is the pretzel. In Lent, Christians made dough of flour, salt, and water. They shaped the dough in the form of two crossed arms to remind themselves to pray. The bread was called "little arms" — "bracellae," later called "Brezel" or "Pretzel." Apparently it was an ancient practice, for there is a picture of a pretzel in a fifth century manuscript. Pretzels were a Lenten food and thus only eaten during the period as a reminder to pray more often.

The Present Observance of Lent

Especially among Protestants today, people are not sympathetic with the mood or methods of Lenten observance. Each year there is a cry by someone for a shorter Lenten period, the dropping of fasting, and the elimination of special Lenten services. Generally, Protestants ignore fasting as being superficial and meaningless. At Vatican II, Roman Catholics relaxed the rules for fasting: Meat may be eaten on Fridays and breakfast may be enjoyed before Holy Communion. People are too comfortable, lax, and affluent to be bothered about self-denial. Because attendance is very poor, many churches no longer have mid-week Lenten services. Many non-liturgical churches never had Lenten services. Moreover, Lent as a time for special personal devotions is not observed by most Christians today even though denominations may produce special Lenten devotional booklets for this purpose.

Lent can be the most fruitful season of the church year as the faithful strictly and sincerely observe the season. It can be a time of spiritual development and preparation for the resurrection.

1. *Penitence.* Lent is a period of self-denial and fasting, a period of spiritual discipline. Persons need this aspect of Lent because they have become flabby, affluent, and lazy. The theme of the day is, "You owe it to yourself." "Enjoy, Enjoy," "Let yourself go and live it up." Lent is a pilgrimage with Jesus to suffering and death. This involves discipline and self-denial. If we expect to rise with Christ in newness of life on Easter, we must first die with him. Lent is a time of learning to die to self. Before we can rejoice, we must mourn. Before we can live, we must die. The problem people face today is their unwillingness to die in order to live. In a world when crime multiplies, selfishness reigns, and sex dominates society, we need a period in which to repent and return to God. This is what Lent is for.

2. *Teaching.* Originally, Lent was a time for preparing candidates for baptism at Easter. Teaching them was a part of their preparation. Lent today can be used to teach people through doctrinal sermons and Bible study, both in groups and as individuals. Lent lends itself to a program of daily Bible reading. A series of sermons on the Creed is appropriate. Lent as a time of growth in the knowledge of the Lord is needed in a world of biblical illiteracy.

3. *Outreach.* During Lent, especially, the cross is uplifted. "And I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men to me." Christ died for the sins of all people. During Lent we witness to the cross and its meaning as redemption. This naturally leads to an outreach to the inactive and unchurched of the community. Through a Lenten program of evangelism, many new members may be received on Palm Sunday or Easter. Traditionally, Lent is the period of evangelism.

4. *Prayer.* Lent can be used today as a special period for extra prayer, both private and public. It calls for spending an extra period in personal prayer. It means scheduling additional services during the weeks of Lent. Through these spiritual exercises, a person is to have a closer walk with God and a dearer company with Christ. By the end of Lent, a person should be built up in his faith. Easter should find him more dedicated to God's work and more consecrated to Christ. As a period of spiritual stimulation, Lent can mean a retreat, a renewal, and a revival in the church.

Preaching During Lent

1. *Opportunity.* During Lent, preaching has its bonanza. Many preachers are in the pulpit as often between Ash Wednesday and Easter as they are in a normal period of six months. Lent can mean a full program of preaching at morning services, evening services, midweek Lenten services, Holy Week services, and possibly noonday Lenten services for business people. It is traditionally the time when series of sermons are presented on Lenten themes. Lent calls for a variety of preaching: meditative, doctrinal, evangelistic. It is the most important time for preaching because it deals with the passion and cross. These constitute the heart of the Christian faith. When the cross is preached, we deal with the fundamental problems and needs of life.

2. *Problem.* Preaching during Lent is becoming increasingly a problem for the minister who wants to get across the Lenten message. This is particularly the case if he follows the lectionary and church year.

Consider the ideal situation which existed in the past:

- a. Sunday mornings — preaching on the pericopes.
- b. Sunday evenings — preaching on the doctrines of the church.
- c. Midweek Lenten services — preaching on Lenten themes.
- d. Daily Holy Week services — preaching on the passion and death of Christ.

Consider the situation that exists today. Sunday evening services are on the way out for many churches. Midweek Lenten services are either very poorly attended or have been canceled. If they are poorly attended, the preacher feels that the majority of his people are not hearing the message of the cross. Holy Week services are limited to Maundy Thursday when the Lord's Supper is administered and only a brief meditation on Communion is delivered, and to Good Friday when a series of very brief messages on the Last Seven Words by guest preachers are heard. If a minister follows the lectionary for Lent, when does he have the time and opportunity to preach the cross and dwell on the passion?

3. *Solutions.* The modern preacher confronting the above problem can find a solution in different approaches.

a. *Ideal situation.* With courage and determination, he schedules a full program of services on Sundays and midweek. He uses the lectionary on Sunday mornings, doctrinal themes on Sunday evenings, provided they are held, and Lenten subjects at the midweek Lenten services.

b. *Lenten services on Sunday evenings.* If it is utterly impossible to hold midweek Lenten services or, if held, impossible to get an acceptable attendance, the Lenten services might be held on Sunday evenings. It needs to be remembered that Sundays are not considered a part of Lent but are Sundays in Lent. Sundays are festival days. Accordingly, the lectionary does not deal with the passion and cross. A compromise may be made under the circumstances to hold the Lenten services on Sunday evenings.

c. *Sunday mornings.* If it is possible to hold services during Lent only on Sunday mornings, the preacher may feel impelled to disregard the lectionary during Lent and preach on Lenten themes. This would be most regrettable, but it may be better than failing to deal with the passion and cross, the heart of our faith. Surely, the cross is to some extent in every sermon, but Lent is the time to give special and extended consideration to the sufferings and death of our Lord.

Lent and the New Lectionary

Aware of the changes that have taken place in today's observance of Lent, the new lectionary adjusts to the situation.

One change is in the name of the sixth Sunday in Lent, formerly known as "Palm Sunday," to Passion Sunday. In the old lectionary, Passion Sunday was the fifth Sunday in Lent. The change results from a realization of the fact that most churches neglect the history of the passion by not holding Holy Week services, the traditional time to deal with the passion. Now on the sixth Sunday, Palm Sunday, with its observance of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, is subordinated to Passion Sunday. The new lectionary suggests the observance of the triumphal entry as an introductory part of the service. The Gospel for the day is a lengthy one, giving the biblical account of the passion events. Since Holy Wednesday night's service, if one is held, usually deals with a cantata; and since Maundy Thursday is a celebration of the institution of the Lord's Supper, and since Good Friday's noon service consists of a brief meditation on the last seven words and the evening service is usually a *Tenebrae* service with no sermon, the one opportunity of Holy Week to preach on the Passion is Lent 6.

There is suggested a change also in the colors for Lent and Holy Week. The traditional color for Lent through Holy Week except Good Friday is purple. An alternate color for Ash Wednesday is black because on this day of repentance the Christian is to die to self. White is suggested as an alternate color on Maundy Thursday to celebrate the beginning of the Lord's Supper. During Holy Week, red is suggested in place of purple to remind people of the sacrifice being made that week. In place of black on Good Friday, it is suggested that an alternate color could be a deeper shade of red than used during Holy Week to reflect the blood of the cross shed for the redemption of the world.

THE EASTER SEASON

The Name of Easter

Easter is the old English adaptation of the pagan name, "Eastre," which was the name of a Teutonic goddess of spring and dawn. Her festival occurred annually at the vernal equinox. The original name for Easter was Pascha, a Hebrew word for Passover. The death and resurrection constituted a new passover for the people of God, a deliverance from the slavery of death. Before Easter became popular as a name, the day was known as "The Lord's Day of Resurrection" and "Paschal Day of the Resurrection."

A History of Easter

Easter is the oldest Christian festival and is the source of the rest of the church year. On the first day of the week, Jesus rose from the dead. This was the apex of Christian fact and devotion. Each Sunday thereafter was celebrated as a "little Easter." Eventually the resurrection's being observed on the first day of the week, changed the day of worship from the Sabbath (Saturday) to the Lord's Day (Sunday). For the Eastern church Easter marked the beginning of the church year.

The ancient church celebrated Easter for an octave, (eight days) each day through the following Sunday. Those baptized on Easter were required to attend the services. They wore white baptismal robes and consequently the first Sunday after Easter was known as "White Sunday." Originally Easter was one unit from Easter to Pentecost, but later it was divided into resurrection, ascension, and pentecost. The new lectionary (1970) returns to making Easter a season of fifty days, from Easter to Pentecost with Ascension Day considered a part of the Easter celebration. As a result, we now refer to the "Sunday of Easter" rather than "Sundays after Easter."

Easter has always been for Christians the feast of feasts. There is no event more important to the Christian. Its primacy was shown by the fact that the resurrection was celebrated each Sunday, and for that reason each Sunday of the church year is considered a festival. The importance of Easter can be seen in the fact that Easter is preceded by a period of preparation — the Lenten season of forty days. Likewise, Easter is observed for a season of fifty days. Moreover, Easter is so important that the entire church year revolves around it. Other festivals and seasons depend upon the date of Easter which varies from year to year.

Easter Day opens the Easter season, but does not close the Lenten season. Thinking that it does is a common mistake in our time. If it did, the Easter season would be a let-down in church attendance, work, and interest. If Easter closes the Lenten season, then the church feels the "show is over," and it is time to go back to business as usual. This is rooted in a misunderstanding of the Lenten season which for some is the chief season of the year. Rather, Easter, based upon the supreme act of God in raising the Son from the dead, is the chief event for the Christian. If this were understood, the church would have its greatest period of interest and activity during the Easter season.

The Date of Easter

Christians are still not agreed on the date of Easter. In ancient times non-Christians lampooned Christians for not being able to decide upon the date of their chief event. As early as the middle of the second century, the church disagreed about the date. The issue was supposedly settled by the Council of Nicea in A.D.325. All Christians were ordered to accept this date: "On the first Sunday after the full moon on or after the first day of Spring, March 21, or if the full moon is on Sunday, the next Sunday after." Thus, Easter may fall between March 22 and April 25. In spite of this, western and eastern Christians have different dates for Easter. The West lives by the Gregorian calendar and the East uses the Julian calendar which is ten days behind the Gregorian. Today there is a movement afoot to have all branches of the church accept April 8 as the date of Easter for all Christians.

The Mood of Easter

Needless to say, Easter is the highest of the high days in the church calendar. Easter is the queen of feasts. True Christians everywhere celebrate the resurrection. On Easter morning it is an ancient tradition for Christians to greet each other as follows: "Christ the Lord is risen!" Answer: "He is risen indeed!"

Joy. Easter is prime time for rejoicing. It is the church's happy day. The "alleluia" dropped for Lent is heard once more. The Lenten fast is ended, and there is rejoicing not only for a return to normal eating but for the fact that now there is no reason to fast. This joy is expressed in a fourteenth century hymn: "Jesus Christ is risen today, Alleluia!"

Life. Easter means eternal life for the believer in Christ. This is symbolized by the abundance of flowers used on Easter.

Newness. The risen Christ is a "new" being with a glorified body. He is now the exalted Christ, the eternal Christ not touched by death. This newness for a Christian through dying and rising with Christ is expressed in the custom of wearing new clothes on Easter.

Hope. Easter brings hope to those who have dead loved ones and to the dying. The resurrection brings assurance that we too shall live with Christ forever. Death has been conquered by the resurrection.

Victory. Jesus is delivered from the worst of the world and the worst of Satan — the power of death. Like a mighty warrior, Christ comes forth from the grave as victor. Christians express their joy over this victory of Christ and participate in his victory by faith. This note of victory is expressed in a seventeenth century Latin hymn: "The strife is o'er, the battle done; now is the Victor's triumph won . . ."

The Color of Easter

The mood of Easter is reflected and expressed in the liturgical color. It is white because it expresses celebration, festivity, joy, and victory. Gold may be used as an alternate color for Easter Day to express the special prominence of the greatest day of the church year.

THE PENTECOST SEASON

(Sundays in Ordinary Time)

Pentecost as a Festival

In the church year Pentecost is a major festival, a high day. It is one of a cluster of three great festivals: Ascension, Pentecost, and Trinity. As a major festival, Pentecost takes precedence over all other sacred or secular events on the calendar.

It is a high day in the church's life because:

1. Pentecost is the anniversary of the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples.
2. Pentecost marks the completion of Christ's redemptive work and the fulfillment of his promise to send the Spirit.
3. On Pentecost the church celebrates her birthday.
4. It is a traditional day for the reception of new members, particularly youth, by baptism or confirmation.
5. Holy Communion may be celebrated on this festival day.
6. Pentecost initiates the second half of the church year. The first half began with Advent and closed with Ascension. Pentecost begins the longest season of the church year with as many as twenty-seven Sundays. While the first half of the year observes the life of Christ, the second half deals with the life of the church through the work, gifts, and fruit of the Holy Spirit.

Pentecost as a Season

Pentecost is observed both as a festival and as a season. Before the appearance of the unified lectionary in 1970, most Protestants observed Pentecost as a festival only. The season following Pentecost was named Trinity.

Up to the seventh century no provision was made for the period from Pentecost to Advent. The second half of the church year consisted only of a reservoir of common masses, ordinary Sundays without any special significance. In northern Europe, the doctrine of the Trinity became increasingly popular. Sundays after Pentecost began to be known as Sundays after Trinity. However, in 1570, the Roman Church adopted the name, "Sunday after Pentecost." Protestants continued to use "Sunday after Trinity." The eastern church followed the Roman custom. Since the new lectionary, Protestants, Eastern Orthodox, and Roman Catholics are using the term, "Sunday after Pentecost."

Names of the Day

1. Pentecost is the official name of the day. The word comes from the Greek, "pentekoste," meaning fifty — fifty days after Easter.
2. Whitsunday. This is an English contraction of "White Sunday," so called because candidates for baptism and confirmation wore white robes on this day to symbolize the joy of the occasion and to indicate that they were cleansed by the Spirit.

Observance of Pentecost

The Christian's Pentecost is related to the Jewish Pentecost. The Jews had a Feast of Weeks (Exodus 34:22; Deuteronomy 16:10; Leviticus 23) seven weeks from the Passover. It marked the giving of the Law and the founding of Israel. In like manner, Christians celebrate Pentecost as the day of receiving the Spirit and the founding of the New Israel.

For the Jews Pentecost was also the Feast of first fruits (Exodus 23:10). It was a harvest festival, a time to give thanks for the harvest. On Pentecost Christians also are grateful for the gift of the Spirit and the gifts brought by the Spirit.

Multitudes of Jews came to Jerusalem from all parts of the world for these feasts. Thus, when the disciples on Pentecost spoke in tongues, Jews from various parts of the world were amazed that they could hear the gospel in their own languages.

On Pentecost a Jewish boy had his Bar Mitzvah at which time he became an adult Jew and assumed full responsibility for obedience to the Law. Likewise, Christian youth are often

confirmed on Pentecost and enter into full membership with the church in terms of adult responsibilities and privileges.

Symbols of Pentecost

The color for the Day of Pentecost is red. It is the color of fire, for the Spirit came in tongues of fire. The fire represents God, "the consuming fire." God the Holy Spirit comes to the disciples. The fire represents, moreover, warm hearts, fiery zeal, dedication, and devotion. Also, red is the color of blood, and represents the blood of the martyrs which is the seed of the church. The color for the Sundays after Pentecost is green, a color of growth. It is during this season that Christians are to grow in the Spirit.

A dove is associated with Pentecost as a symbol of the Spirit. When Jesus was baptized the Spirit came upon him in the form of a dove.

The number seven is identified with Pentecost, because the Spirit brings the sevenfold gifts of the Spirit. In church symbolism, these sevenfold gifts are portrayed as seven lamps, seven doves, seven tongues, and a seven-branch candlestick.

Customs of Pentecost

In the Medieval period it was the custom in some churches to let a disc with a dove painted on it fall from the ceiling upon the congregation below. This symbolized the coming of the Spirit upon the people. Often this was followed by throwing red roses upon the people to symbolize the water of baptism falling on them. In thirteenth century France, white pigeons were released during church services. Some families followed the custom of suspending a dove over their dining tables.

Trumpets were used during the worship services to indicate the Spirit's coming as a rushing, mighty wind as happened on Pentecost.

In England on the day after Pentecost, religious plays were produced and "Whitsunale" was sold. Churches and universities made and sold ale to raise funds for the poor or to repair buildings.

In the northeastern part of America "Pinkster" was celebrated on Pentecost. The word came from the German, "Pfingsten," meaning "spirit." It was an occasion for frolic, fun, and much drinking.

The Mood of Pentecost

1. *Celebration.* Pentecost has the mood of joy because the promise of Jesus to send the Spirit was fulfilled and the gift was received. Thus, the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325 banned kneeling and fasting on Pentecost. Pentecost has the joy of new members received and sinners coming to repentance. It is the joy of a birthday party, for it is the birthday of the church.
2. *Gratitude.* Christians are grateful on Pentecost for the Spirit and his sevenfold gifts. The Spirit brings life; he calls, enlightens, and gathers believers into the church. Since the church is the product of the Spirit, Christians are grateful on Pentecost for the church as the mother of their faith.
3. *Hope.* Hope results from the Spirit's making all things new. Pentecost is renewal and revival day in the church. The Spirit is renewed in the faithful. Pentecost is more than an observance of a great event in the past but is a repeatable experience here and now. With the Spirit comes new life and hope.

THE ADVENT SEASON

The Meaning of Advent

Advent, a season of four Sundays, opens the church year. The season begins on the Sunday closest to St. Andrew's Day, November 30. The observance of Advent originated in France during the fourth century. The duration of the season varied from four to seven weeks until the Bishop of Rome in the sixth century set the season at four weeks. In ancient times Advent was strictly observed; every Christian was required to attend church services and fast daily.

The word Advent consists of two Latin words: *ad - venire*, "To come to." Advent's message is that God in Christ is coming to the world. This coming may be:

1. *A past experience.* God did come in Christ at Christmas. The prophets' promises were fulfilled in the Babe.
2. *A present experience.* God may come to you this Christmas in terms of re-birth, either for the first time, or a renewed birth in deeper dimensions of reality.
3. *A future experience.* Christ will return unpredictably at the end of the world. "He shall come again with glory to judge the quick and the dead."

The Message of Advent

Since Advent promises the sure coming of the Lord, it's message is "prepare." The Lord is coming whether the world is ready or not. For those unprepared, his coming means judgment. For those ready for his coming, it means salvation.

How does Advent suggest that we prepare?

1. *Repentance* — forsake the sins of the world for a godly way of life.
2. *Prayer* — pray for the coming of Christ, for he shall save.
3. *Patience* — his coming may be delayed. Watch and wait, for his coming may be sudden.

The Mood of Advent

1. *Expressed in color.* The mood of Advent is expressed in the liturgical color, violet. It depicts a feeling of quiet dignity, royalty, and repentance. Violet was the traditional color of a king's robe; the coming Christ is king of kings. Advent, like Lent, is a time for solemn and sober thought about one's sins leading to repentance. It denotes a quiet time for watching, waiting, and praying for Christ to come again, either personally or universally. An alternate color for Advent is blue, the color of hope.

2. *Solemnity and sobriety.* Advent is a time to become aware of one's sins. Traditionally Advent is a penitential season, originally known as the "Winter Lent." This mood of sobriety is expressed not only in the liturgical color, violet, but in the music of Advent hymns like "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." During Advent choirs may omit processions or have "silent processions." Weddings in this season are discouraged. Christmas carols and decorations are not used until Christmas Eve.

3. *Joy in hope.* Advent stresses not so much fulfillment as anticipation of fulfillment: the Lord is coming! Christians have great expectations of Christ's coming again. As a family looks forward to a son returning from a war and as a bride anticipates her wedding day, so a Christian looks forward with joy to Christ's coming. Yet, this is a different kind of joy — a joy of hope amid solemnity. It is the quiet joy of anticipation and not the joy of celebration of a past event. This type of joy is expressed in the Advent hymns: "Joy to the World, the Lord is Come(ing)," and "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel . . . Rejoice, Rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel."

The Observance of Advent

Of all the seasons, Advent is the most difficult to observe because of the competition with the commercial world. The world "celebrates" Christmas during Advent rather than on Christmas: decorations, carols, parties. Even some churches fall prey to this misplaced celebration by putting up Christmas decorations in the church, singing carols at Advent services, conducting candlelight services, and arranging "Christmas parties" during the weeks before Christmas.

Increasingly, the church is beginning to observe Advent seriously as a vital and necessary time of preparation for a meaningful, spiritual Christmas. This observance is expressed in various ways:

1. Use of an Advent wreath in the church and homes.
2. Use of an Advent calendar for children in the home.
3. Discouragement of weddings and pre-Christmas parties.
4. Use of Advent hymns, prayers, and anthems throughout Advent.
5. Silent processions during Advent.
6. Special midweek Advent services.
7. Use of Advent symbols: Messianic rose, Tau cross, etc.
8. Preparation of Chrismons for decorating the Christmas tree.

Preaching Goals for Advent

During the four weeks of Advent, a preacher has much to preach about and many worthy reasons to preach. His objectives during the season may be:

1. To counteract the commercialism of Christmas through a strict and thorough observance of Advent.
2. To prepare the people for a meaningful Christmas by motivating them to prepare spiritually through repentance.
3. To stimulate Bible reading in home and church.
4. To stir up renewed interest, faith and zeal for another church year which begins Advent Sunday; to call for a deeper, renewed commitment to Christ and the church.
5. To think through the meaning of history in relation to the second coming of Christ.
6. To give an understanding and appreciation of the hope for Christian Old Testament prophecy.
7. To prepare people spiritually for the Second Coming of Christ that they might be in a constant state of preparedness for his coming.
8. To give a knowledge and appreciation of the ministry of John the Baptist as one who teaches the necessity of spiritual preparation for the coming of the Christ.

The Theology of Advent

A preacher cannot preach according to the Advent season unless his theology is properly related both to the beginning and the ending of Christ, the Incarnation and the Parousia. Advent has significance only in relation to the two. If he cannot sincerely accept the theology of Advent, he will either be silent or insincere.

1. The coming of Christ is the culmination of an historical process coming down through the history of Israel. This is the climax of the *Heilsgeschichte*, the plan of salvation. The Old Testament is a record of God's preparing the world for the coming of his Son. "In the fulness of time, God sent forth his Son . . ." Since Advent is the Old Testament period of the church year, the emphasis is upon the preparatory work of God through prophets, priests, kings, and acts of history for the coming of the Messiah.

2. The child born in a manger in Bethlehem was none other than the Son of God, the promised Messiah. Because "The word became flesh," Advent, as the time of preparation for the Messiah, makes sense. This holy child is "very God of very God." In him God invaded human history. He was the Christ-event, the Word-event. If this is not true, then there is no meaning or message to Advent.

3. Advent deals also with the Second Coming of Christ. If this has already occurred, as some believe, in the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, then Advent has lost much of its message for today's people. If there is no Second Coming, the Advent passages dealing with watching, waiting, praying, and preparing for the return of Christ have no preaching value.

A firm conviction in the coming again of Christ can mean much to our homiletical efforts. Because it is possible for him to be born again in our hearts at Christmas, it is urgent that we strictly observe Advent and to be spiritually prepared for his advent.

A sincere acceptance of the Second Coming of Christ leads a preacher to discuss the meaning of history as culminating in Christ, the obliteration of evil, and the final victory of the forces of God.

THE EPIPHANY SEASON

A History of Epiphany

Next to Easter, Epiphany is the oldest season of the church year. In Asia Minor and Egypt, Epiphany was observed as early as the second century. The Festival of the Epiphany fell and still falls on January 6. It was observed as a unitive festival — both the birth and baptism of Jesus were celebrated at this time.

January 6 was chosen as Epiphany Day because it was the winter solstice, a pagan festival celebrating the birthday of the sun god. In 331 B.C. the solstice was moved to December 25, but January 6 continued to be observed. Christians substituted Epiphany for the solstice. The emphasis was upon the re-birth of light. In keeping with this time, the First Lesson for Epiphany Day is appropriate: "Arise, shine; for your light has come."

The unitive Festival of Epiphany was divided when December 25 was chosen as the birthday of Jesus. The church in the East continued to celebrate Epiphany in terms of the baptism of Jesus while the Western church associated Epiphany with the visit of the Magi. For the East the baptism of Jesus was more vital because of the Gnostic heresy claiming that only at his baptism did Jesus become the Son of God. On the other hand, to associate Epiphany with the Magi is appropriate, for the Magi did not get to Bethlehem until a year after Jesus' birth. By this time the holy family was in a house rather than in a stable. Consequently, the Magi could not have been a part of the manger scene as is popularly portrayed in today's Christmas scenes and plays. The new lectionary and calendar combine the two by placing the visit of the Magi on Epiphany Day and the Baptism of Jesus on Epiphany 1.

The Name of Epiphany

In the church year Epiphany Day is a major festival, similar to Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. In spite of this, more churches ignore January 6 as the Day of Epiphany because it usually falls on a weekday. For Roman Catholics it is a day of obligation to attend Mass.

The name, "Epiphany," means "Manifestation." The light manifests itself in the darkness, God reveals himself in Jesus, and the glory of God is seen in Jesus. In the course of history Epiphany was known by other names: Feast of the Manifestation, Feast of Lights, Feast of the Appearing of Christ, Feast of the Three Kings, and The Twelfth Day.

The Season of Epiphany

Six out of every seven years the Festival of the Epiphany falls on a weekday. The Sundays after January 6 are entitled "Sunday after the Epiphany."

Epiphany is an accoridian season. The number of weeks it is observed depends upon the date of Easter. If Easter comes early, the season is short; if it is late, the season of Epiphany is long. In early times the length of the Epiphany season ranged from three to ten weeks. From the sixth century, Epiphany was restricted to six Sundays at the most. In the Eastern church it was the custom to announce on Epiphany Day the upcoming date of Easter. The length of the season depended on the announced date.

Now the Epiphany season extends from six to nine Sundays. With the appearance of the new lectionary and calendar in 1970, the season was lengthened to a possible nine weeks because the former pre-Lenten season of three Sundays was made a part of Epiphany.

The Color of Epiphany

The color used in the paraments denotes the mood and meaning of the season. White is used for three Sundays: Epiphany Day, The Baptism of our Lord (Epiphany 1), and Transfiguration. White is used for these three big days because it is a time of celebration. White expresses light, glory, victory, and celebration.

Green is used on the Sundays other than the above three. Green is the color of growth. During Epiphany we are to grow into a fuller realization of the nature of Christ as the Son of God. Sunday after Sunday there is growth in God's revealing his glory in Jesus.

The Meaning and Message of Epiphany

1. *The Epiphany Star* — Epiphany is associated with the star that led the Wise Men to the manger. The Epiphany star is a five-pointed star representing the Incarnation. It is not a

six-pointed star, for this is the star of David, representing the Old Testament with its prophecies. It is not a seven-pointed star which is the star of perfection. Nor is it an eight-pointed star which stands for regeneration and is associated with baptism.

The purpose of the star of Bethlehem was to guide men to Christ. The star is help from above in bringing us to Christ. This is one reason why Epiphany is the time for the church's emphasis upon evangelism.

The star also guides us into the truth of this new-born child in the manger. We are led to an ever-deepening understanding of the nature of Jesus. We are to come eventually to see that Jesus is God's Son as stated at his baptism, "You are my beloved son." Just before the Transfiguration, Peter gets the insight, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Epiphany ends on the mountain of Transfiguration with God again saying that Jesus is his beloved Son. One purpose of Epiphany is to bring people to this same conviction as preparation for Lent, for the meaning of the cross is in the fact that the man on the cross is "the Lamb of God."

2. *The Epiphany Candle* — Another symbol of the season is the candle which sheds its light into a dark world. Christ is the light of the world. He comes into the world as a baby, a small, frail candle. It is the nature of light to scatter and annihilate the darkness. Light brings enlightenment to mankind, resulting in vision and insight. Because of light, there is manifestation and revelation. During Epiphany we see the light of God in Jesus. He reveals, shows, manifests God. Light has certain characteristics. It is a *given* light. The light comes from God, from the star. Man is not the light. At best he can only reflect the light. It is a light that *grows* in intensity. The candle grows and grows until it becomes as bright as the sun. Throughout Epiphany the light of God's glory is seen increasingly in Jesus until the Transfiguration when his clothes and face are as bright as the sun. You may think of it in terms of concentric circles: a small circle around the flame of the candle until the last circle is as wide as the world. The baby Jesus grows to a mature man of thirty when he is seen as the Son of God. A third characteristic of light is that it *gives itself*. The candle gives light only by virtue of its burning itself up. Light to be light must give, expend, and die to self. At the end of Epiphany we see the light of Christ, at its brightest, but it burns itself out on the cross, only to be re-kindled on Easter.

Epiphany and the Church

1. *A time of worship* — Epiphany is a season of worship because it deals with the glory of God manifested in Jesus. The season begins with the Wise Men's coming to worship the new-born king. The season ends with the worship experience on Mt. Transfiguration. When people see Jesus as God's son, they instinctively fall down to worship him as Lord.

2. *A Time to Witness* — Epiphany is the season of light, and light shows and reveals. The light burns that all might see the truth and the way to God. It is the time for emphasis upon evangelism, the telling of the good news, the spreading of the light of Christ in a dark world. Christ is the light and Christians reflect that light in the world. They are light-bearers, and they are to go through life lighting candles.

3. *A Time to Win* — The universal Christ is the center of Epiphany. This is the teaching of Epiphany Day with the coming of the Gentile kings to worship Jesus as Lord. The light of Christ knows no end; it goes to the ends of the earth. He is the light to lighten the Gentiles. The church goes about her business of winning the world for Christ. The light of Christ is not to merely shine on Christians but through them to the salvation of humankind. During this season the church places emphasis upon the cause of world missions. It is the outreach time of the church.

THE LENTEN SEASON

The Lenten season may not be the longest season in the church year but it is one of the most important seasons, if not the most important season, of the year. It is a time for spiritual preparation through repentance and growth in faith for Easter. It is the time of the church year when the passion and death of the Savior come into focus. It begins with a special day of repentance, Ash Wednesday, and ends in the depth of sorrow and tragedy on Good Friday. The name of the season, Lent, does not reflect the mood or message of the season. It is an old Anglo-Saxon word *Lencten* or *Lenchthen*, which means the lengthening of the days as spring appears. To preach meaningfully and properly, a preacher needs to know the message of Lent and feel its mood and spirit.

Development of the Season

Lent as a period of forty days came into being as a result of a long period of development. Originally in the first century Lent was only a period of forty hours in keeping with the forty hours Jesus' body was in the tomb. The forty-hour observance ended with an Easter service at 3 a.m. Later the forty hours grew into six days during the third century. The six days were not the last week in Lent but an extension of the forty hours. These six days were known as Holy Week, days of strict abstinence. Holy Week observance began in Jerusalem during the fourth century. Services were held on the appropriate day at the places where special events took place during the last week of Jesus' life: the Upper Room, Gethsemane, Pilate's Court, etc. When Holy Week was observed in the West, they substituted the stations of the cross for actual places in Jerusalem. Rome placed special emphasis upon the triduum: Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter. In the fourth century, the days of Holy Week were designated:

- Palm Sunday — entry into Jerusalem
- Monday — the cleansing of the temple
- Tuesday — the Discourse on the Mount of Olives
- Wednesday — Judas agreement
- Maundy Thursday — Upper Room meeting
- Good Friday — Calvary
- Saturday — the rest in the tomb

The six days grew into thirty-six days, as a tithe of the 365 days of the year. By approximately 731, the time of Charlemagne, four days were added to the thirty-six to make the present season of forty days. The four days consisted of Ash Wednesday to the First Sunday in Lent. The number forty was a popular and meaningful number: Jesus was tempted for forty days in the wilderness, Moses fasted forty days on Sinai, Elijah fasted forty days on the way to the mountain of God, and the Israelites spent forty years in the wilderness.

Sundays were never a part of Lent. We speak of the Sundays *in* Lent, not of Lent. The Sundays are known by their Latin names which come from the first Latin word of Introit: *Invocabit*, *Judica*, etc. However, the Lenten emphasis spilled over into the Sunday services in terms of the use of the penitential color, violet, and the dropping of the *Alleluia* and the *Gloria in Excelsis*.

This duration of Lent is not universal. The Eastern Orthodox church extends Lent over an eight-week period. Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday are not considered a part of Lent and are exempted as fast days.

The Date of Lent

Lent begins forty-six days before Easter in spite of the fact that Lent is a season of forty days. This is due to the fact that Sundays are not a part of Lent. When Lent begins, depends upon the date of Easter. In 325 the church decided that Easter would fall on the first Sunday after the full moon which occurs on or after March 21.

Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent. The name, "Ash Wednesday," was given by Pope Urban II in 1099. Prior to this, the first day of Lent was known as "Beginning of the Fast." The day was set aside as a special day of repentance and as the opening of a season of repentance. "Ash" symbolized the repentance called for. Priests had the custom of sprinkling ashes on the heads of the faithful as they said, "Remember thou are dust and to dust

thou shalt return." The ashes came from the burned palms of the previous Palm Sunday. To this day, Roman Catholics on Ash Wednesday receive a smudge of ashes on their foreheads. Protestants dropped the custom because they felt it contradicted the Gospel for Ash Wednesday: "And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen of men." (Matthew 6:15-21)

Shrove Tuesday is the day before Ash Wednesday. "Shrove" referred to the shriving or cleansing of their sins by going to confession on this day. On the other hand, it was a day of feasting and for carnival. The French called it "Mardi Gras." The Germans had "Fasching" or "Fasch Nacht." It was a time to use up their store of fat which was forbidden during Lent. Thus, many Germans used up the fat by making doughnuts on Shrove Tuesday, and the English specialized in pancakes.

The Past Observance of Lent

In past centuries Lent was strictly observed and was a very meaningful season of the church year.

1. It was a time of preparation. Originally, Lent was the six-week period to prepare candidates for baptism at Easter. During this period of examination, instruction, penitence, and prayer, the candidates proved their worthiness for the sacrament of baptism. When Christianity was legalized in 325, Lent became a period of preparation for the entire people of God.

2. In the past, Lent was a period of penitence. It was a time for mourning, solemnity, and sadness. A hymn for Holy Week says, "to come and mourn with me awhile." The mood is expressed in the penitential color, violet, for this season, the same color as Advent. To remind the faithful of the nature of the season, a violet veil was hung between the nave and chancel. Often the altar cross was veiled in violet as a reminder of the penitential character of the season. In keeping with this somber mood, the "Alleluia" and the "Gloria in Excelsis" were omitted from the liturgy. Weddings during Lent were forbidden. Organs were stopped. Public entertainment was outlawed. Often royalty during Lent dressed in black. Lent was a time to be sorry for one's sins. It was also a time for the re-living of the sufferings of Christ. When one's Savior is on his way to death in your behalf, it is most unseemly to be frivolous and gay.

3. Fasting as a means of spiritual discipline was a part of past Lenten observance. From the time of the Apostles, Friday, the day of Jesus' death, was a day of fasting. During Holy Week, Good Friday and Holy Saturday were days of fasting. In the fourth century, fasting was extended to the entire period of Lent.

Fasting was taken seriously. There was abstinence from meat, dairy products, and eggs for the period of Lent. Fasting meant only one meal per day and the rest of the day one existed on water. In the Middle Ages the fast was relaxed to the extent that lunch was permitted. At the time of the Reformation, many Protestants dropped fasting as being "Popish." Some Protestants like John Wesley practiced fasting as a discipline, but if it were practiced, it was on a voluntary basis. For most Protestants, fasting was more of a token than a real denial of food.

The purpose of fasting was twofold. It was for personal discipline and for participation in the sufferings of Christ who in this season was on his way to Jerusalem to suffer and die. The second purpose of fasting was to render some service through fasting. There was a positive side to fasting; it was not only for personal benefit. Pope Leo I in 460 said, "What we forego by fasting is to be given as alms to the poor."

4. Lent was a time for special prayer. During Lent, devout Christians were concerned about the development of their spiritual lives. They gave extra time and effort to personal and public prayer. The traditional symbol for Lenten prayer is the pretzel. In Lent, Christians made dough of flour, salt, and water. They shaped the dough in the form of two crossed arms to remind themselves to pray. The bread was called "little arms" — "bracellae," later called "Brezel" or "Pretzel." Apparently it was an ancient practice, for there is a picture of a pretzel in a fifth century manuscript. Pretzels were a Lenten food and thus only eaten during the period as a reminder to pray more often.

The Present Observance of Lent

Especially among Protestants today, people are not sympathetic with the mood or

methods of Lenten observance. Each year there is a cry by someone for a shorter Lenten period, the dropping of fasting, and the elimination of special Lenten services. Generally, Protestants ignore fasting as being superficial and meaningless. At Vatican II, Roman Catholics relaxed the rules for fasting: Meat may be eaten on Fridays and breakfast may be enjoyed before Holy Communion. People are too comfortable, lax, and affluent to be bothered about self-denial. Because attendance is very poor, many churches no longer have mid-week Lenten services. Many non-liturgical churches never had Lenten services. Moreover, Lent as a time for special personal devotions is not observed by most Christians today even though denominations may produce special Lenten devotional booklets for this purpose.

Lent can be the most fruitful season of the church year as the faithful strictly and sincerely observe the season. It can be a time of spiritual development and preparation for the resurrection.

1. *Penitence.* Lent is a period of self-denial and fasting, a period of spiritual discipline. Persons need this aspect of Lent because they have become flabby, affluent, and lazy. The theme of the day is, "You owe it to yourself," "Enjoy, Enjoy," "Let yourself go and live it up." Lent is a pilgrimage with Jesus to suffering and death. This involves discipline and self-denial. If we expect to rise with Christ in newness of life on Easter, we must first die with him, Lent is a time of learning to die to self. Before we can rejoice, we must mourn. Before we can live, we must die. The problem people face today is their willingness to die in order to live. In a world when crime multiplies, selfishness reigns, and sex dominates society, we need a period in which to repent and return to God. This is what Lent is for.

2. *Teaching.* Originally, Lent was a time for preparing candidates for baptism at Easter. Teaching them was part of their preparation. Lent today can be used to teach people through doctrinal sermons and Bible study both in groups and as individuals. Lent lends itself to a program of daily Bible reading. A series of sermons on the Creed is appropriate. Lent as a time of growth in the knowledge of the Lord is needed in a world of biblical illiteracy.

3. *Outreach.* During Lent, especially, the cross is uplifted. "And I, if I be lifted up, will draw all me to me." Christ died for the sins of all people. During Lent we witness to the cross and its meaning as redemption. This naturally leads to an outreach to the inactive and unchurched of the community. Through a Lenten program of evangelism, many new members may be received on Palm Sunday or Easter. Traditionally, Lent is the period of evangelism.

4. *Prayer.* Lent can be used today as a special period for extra prayer, both private and public. It calls for spending an extra period in personal prayer. It means scheduling additional services during the weeks of Lent. Through these spiritual exercises, a person is to have a closer walk with God and a dearer company with Christ. By the end of Lent, a person should be built up in his faith. Easter should find him more dedicated to God's work and more consecrated to Christ. As a period of spiritual stimulation, Lent can mean a retreat, a renewal, and a revival in the church.

Preaching During Lent

1. *Opportunity.* During Lent, preaching has its bonanza. Many preachers are in the pulpit as often between Ash Wednesday and Easter as they are in a normal period of six months. Lent can mean a full program of preaching at morning services, evening services, midweek Lenten services, Holy Week services, and possibly noonday Lenten services for business people. It is traditionally the time when series of sermons are presented on Lenten themes. Lent calls for a variety of preaching: meditative, doctrinal, evangelistic. It is the most important time for preaching because it deals with the passion and cross. These constitute the heart of the Christian faith. When the cross is preached, we deal with the fundamental problems and needs of life.

2. *Problem.* Preaching during Lent is becoming increasingly a problem for the minister who wants to get across the Lenten message. This is particularly the case if he follows the lectionary and church year.

Consider the ideal situation which existed in the past:

- a. Sunday mornings — preaching on the pericopes.
- b. Sunday evenings — preaching on the doctrines of the church.

- c. Midweek Lenten services — preaching on Lenten themes.
- d. Daily Holy Week services — preaching on the passion and death of Christ.

Consider the situation that exists today. Sunday evening services are on the way out for many churches. Midweek Lenten services are either very poorly attended or have been cancelled. If they are poorly attended, the preacher feels that the majority of his people are not hearing the message of the cross. Holy Week services are limited to Maundy Thursday when the Lord's Supper is administered and only a brief meditation on Communion is delivered, and to Good Friday when a series of very brief messages on the Last Seven Words by guest preachers are heard. If a minister follows the lectionary for Lent, when does he have the time and opportunity to preach the cross and dwell on the passion?

3. *Solutions.* The modern preacher confronting the above problem can find a solution in different approaches.

- a. Ideal situation. With courage and determination, he schedules a full program of services on Sundays and midweek. He uses the lectionary on Sunday mornings, doctrinal themes on Sunday evenings, provided they are held, and Lenten subjects at the midweek Lenten services.
- b. Lenten services on Sunday evenings. If it is utterly impossible to hold midweek Lenten services or, if held, impossible to get an acceptable attendance, the Lenten services might be held on Sunday evenings. It needs to be remembered that Sundays are not considered a part of Lent but are Sundays in Lent. Sundays are festival days. Accordingly, the lectionary does not deal with the passion and cross. A compromise may be made under the circumstances to hold the Lenten services on Sunday evenings.
- c. Sunday mornings. If it is possible to hold services during Lent only on Sunday mornings, the preacher may feel impelled to disregard the lectionary during Lent and preach on Lenten themes. This would be most regrettable, but it may be better than failing to deal with the passion and cross, the heart of our faith. Surely, the cross is to some extent in every sermon, but Lent is the time to give special and extended consideration to the sufferings and death of our Lord.

Lent and the New Lectionary

Aware of the changes that have taken place in today's observance of Lent, the new lectionary adjusts to the situation.

One change is in the name of the sixth Sunday in Lent, formerly known as "Palm Sunday," to Passion Sunday. In the old lectionary, Passion Sunday was the fifth Sunday in Lent. The change results from a realization of the fact that most churches neglect the history of the passion by not holding Holy Week services, the traditional time to deal with the passion. Now on the sixth Sunday, Palm Sunday, with its observance of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, is subordinated to Passion Sunday. The new lectionary suggests the observance of the triumphal entry as an introductory part of the service. The Gospel for the day is a lengthy one, giving the biblical account of the passion events. Since Holy Wednesday night's service, if one is held, usually deals with a cantata; and since Maundy Thursday is a celebration of the institution of the Lord's Supper, and since Good Friday's noon service consists of a brief meditation on the last seven words and the evening service is usually a Tenebrae service with no sermon, the one opportunity of Holy Week to preach on the Passion is Lent 6.

There is suggested a change also in the colors for Lent and Holy Week. The traditional color for Lent through Holy Week except Good Friday is purple. An alternate color for Ash Wednesday is black because on this day of repentance the Christian is to die to self. White is suggested as an alternate color on Maundy Thursday to celebrate the beginning of the Lord's Supper. During Holy Week, red is suggested in place of purple to remind people of the sacrifice being made that week. In place of black on Good Friday, it is suggested that an alternate color could be a deeper shade of red than used during Holy Week to reflect the blood of the cross shed for the redemption of the world.

LENT

Lent 1 — Lent is a testing time.

- L1 — Abraham's faith tested in the sacrifice of Isaac.
- L2 — Faith is tested by life's suffering and tragedy.
- G — Faith is tested by temptation.

Lent 2 — Lent is a time of suffering.

L1 — God confronts Jacob while fleeing from wrath of Esau.

L2 — Christians rejoice in their suffering for Christ.

G — Jesus announces his forthcoming suffering in Jerusalem.

Lent 3 — Lent is a time of cleansing.

L1 — Ten Commandments: the purity God expects of man.

L2 — Necessary righteousness comes by faith in Christ.

G — Jesus cleanses the temple of commercialism.

Lent 4 — Lent is a time of believing.

L1 — Healing comes by looking in faith to serpent.

L2 — Sinners are saved by grace through faith.

G — Eternal life comes by faith in the cross.

Lent 5 — Lent is a time of sacrifice.

L1 — Sacrificing the old covenant for a new one.

L2 — Obedience comes from sacrifice.

G — Through sacrifice comes glory.

Lent 6 — Lent is a time of opportunity.

L1 — Your King comes to you — a promise.

L2 — In humility Christ came to earth to die on cross.

G — Christ comes to Jerusalem to be King-Messiah.

A Lenten Series Based on Gospels***Theme: The Way of the Cross***

Lent 1 — Leads to the Testing of Faith.

Lent 2 — Involves Suffering for Christians.

Lent 3 — Includes Cleansing of the Heart.

Lent 4 — Calls for Faith in the Cross.

Lent 5 — Demands Sacrifice of Self.

Lent 6 — Gives an Opportunity to Decide.

THE EASTER SEASON

The Name of Easter

Easter is the Old English adaptation of the pagan name, "Eastre," which was the name of a Teutonic goddess of spring and dawn. Her festival occurred annually at the vernal equinox. The original name for Easter was *Pascha*, a Hebrew word for Passover. The death and Resurrection constituted a new passover for the people of God, a deliverance from the slavery of death. Before Easter became popular as a name, the day was known as "The Lord's Day of Resurrection" and "Paschal Day of the Resurrection."

A History of Easter

Easter is the oldest Christian festival and is the source of the rest of the church year. On the first day of the week, Jesus rose from the dead. This was the apex of Christian fact and devotion. Each Sunday thereafter was celebrated as a "little Easter." Eventually the Resurrection's being observed on the first day of the week changed the day of worship from the Sabbath (Saturday) to the Lord's Day (Sunday). For the Eastern church Easter marked the beginning of the church year.

The ancient church celebrated Easter for an octave (eight days), each day through the following Sunday. Those baptized on Easter were required to attend the services. They wore white baptismal robes and consequently the first Sunday after Easter was known as "White Sunday." Originally Easter was one unit from Easter to Pentecost, but later it was divided into Resurrection, Ascension, and Pentecost. The new lectionary (1970) returns to making Easter a season of fifty days, from Easter to Pentecost with Ascension Day considered a part of the Easter celebration. As a result, we now refer to the "Sunday of Easter" rather than "Sundays after Easter."

Easter has always been for Christians the feast of feasts. There is no event more important to the Christian. Its primacy was shown by the fact that the Resurrection was celebrated each Sunday, and for that reason each Sunday of the church year is considered a festival. The importance of Easter can be seen in the fact that Easter is preceded by a period of preparation — the Lenten season of forty days. Likewise, Easter is observed for a season of fifty days. Moreover, Easter is so important that the entire church year revolves around it. Other festivals and seasons depend upon the date of Easter which varies from year to year.

Easter Day opens the Easter season, but does not close the Lenten season. Thinking that it does is a common mistake in our time. If it did, the Easter season would be a let-down in church attendance, work, and interest. If Easter closes the Lenten season, then the church feels the "show is over" and it is time to go back to business as usual. This is rooted in a misunderstanding of the Lenten season which for some is the chief season of the year. Rather, Easter, based upon the supreme act of God in raising the Son from the dead, is the chief event for the Christian. If this were understood, the church would have its greatest period of interest and activity during the Easter season.

The Date of Easter

Christians are still not agreed on the date of Easter. In ancient times non-Christians lampooned Christians for not being able to decide upon the date of their chief event. As early as the middle of the second century, the church disagreed about the date. The issue was supposedly settled by the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325. All Christians were ordered to accept this date: "On the first Sunday after the full moon on or after the first day of Spring, March 21, or, if the full moon is on Sunday, the next Sunday after." Thus, Easter may fall between March 22 and April 25. In spite of this, western and eastern Christians have different dates for Easter. The West lives by the Gregorian calendar and the East uses the Julian calendar which is ten days behind the Gregorian. Today there is a movement on foot to have all branches of the church accept April 8 as the date of Easter for all Christians.

The Mood of Easter

Needless to say, Easter is the highest of the high days in the church calendar. Easter is the queen of feasts. True Christians everywhere celebrate the Resurrection. On Easter morning it is an ancient tradition for Christians to greet each other as follows: "Christ the Lord is risen!" Answer: "He is risen indeed!"

Joy. Easter is prime time for rejoicing. It is the church's happy day. The "Alleluia" dropped for Lent is heard once more. The Lenten fast is ended, and there is rejoicing not only for a return to normal eating but for the fact that now there is no reason to fast. This joy is expressed in a fourteenth century hymn: "Jesus Christ is risen today, Alleluia!"

Life. Easter means eternal life for the believer in Christ. This is symbolized by the abundance of flowers used on Easter.

Newness. The risen Christ is a "new" being with a glorified body. He is now the exalted Christ, the eternal Christ not touched by death. This newness for a Christian through dying and rising with Christ is expressed in the custom of wearing new clothes on Easter.

Hope. Easter brings hope to those who have dead loved ones and to the dying. The Resurrection brings assurance that we too shall live with Christ forever. Death has been conquered by the Resurrection.

Victory. Jesus is delivered from the worst of man and the worst of Satan — the power of death. Like a mighty warrior, Christ comes forth from the grave as victor. Christians express their joy over this victory of Christ and participate in his victory by faith. This note of victory is expressed in a seventeenth century Latin hymn: "The strife is o'er, the battle done; now is the Victor's triumph won . . ."

The Color of Easter

The mood of Easter is reflected and expressed in the liturgical color. It is white because it expresses celebration, festivity, joy, and victory. Gold may be used as an alternate color for Easter Day to express the special prominence of the greatest day of the church year.

THE PENTECOST SEASON

Pentecost as a Festival

In the church year Pentecost is a major festival, a high day. It is one of a cluster of three great festivals: Ascension, Pentecost, and Trinity. As a major festival, Pentecost takes precedence over all other sacred or secular events on the calendar.

It is a high day in the church's life because:

1. Pentecost is the anniversary of the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples.
2. Pentecost marks the completion of Christ's redemptive work and the fulfillment of his promise to send the Spirit.
3. On Pentecost the church celebrates its birthday.
4. It is a traditional day for the reception of new members, particularly youth by baptism or confirmation.
5. Holy Communion may be celebrated on this festival day.
6. Pentecost initiates the second half of the church year. The first half began with Advent and closed with Ascension. Pentecost begins the longest season of the church year with as many as twenty-seven Sundays. While the first half of the year observes the life of Christ, the second half deals with the life of the church through the work, gifts, and fruit of the Holy Spirit.

Pentecost as a Season

Pentecost is observed both as a festival and as a season. Before the appearance of the unified lectionary in 1970, most Protestants observed Pentecost as a festival only. The season following Pentecost was named Trinity.

Up to the seventh century no provision was made for the period from Pentecost to Advent. The second half of the church year consisted only of a reservoir of common masses, ordinary Sundays without any special significance. In northern Europe, the doctrine of the Trinity became increasingly popular. Sundays after Pentecost began to be known as Sundays after Trinity. However, in 1570, the Roman Church adopted the name, "Sunday after Pentecost." Protestants continued to use "Sunday after Trinity." The Eastern church followed the Roman custom. Since the new lectionary, Protestants, Eastern Orthodox, and Roman Catholics are using the term, "Sunday after Pentecost."

Names of the Day

1. Pentecost — the official name of the day. The word comes from the Greek, *pentekoste*, meaning fifty — fifty days after Easter.
2. Whitsunday. It is an English contraction of "White Sunday," so called because candidates for baptism and confirmation wore white robes on this day to symbolize the joy of the occasion and to indicate that they were cleansed by the Spirit.

Observance of Pentecost

The Christian's Pentecost is related to the Jewish Pentecost. The Jews had a Feast of Weeks (Exodus 34:22; Deuteronomy 16:10; Leviticus 23:15-22) seven weeks from the Passover. It marked the giving of the Law and the founding of Israel. In like manner, Christians celebrate Pentecost as the day of receiving the Spirit and the founding of the New Israel.

For the Jews Pentecost was also the Feast of First Fruits (Exodus 23:10). It was a harvest festival, a time to give thanks for the harvest. On Pentecost Christians also are grateful for the gift of the Spirit and the gifts brought by the Spirit.

Multitudes of Jews came to Jerusalem from all parts of the world for these feasts. Thus, when the disciples on Pentecost spoke in tongues, Jews from various parts of the world were amazed that they could hear the Gospel in their own languages.

On Pentecost a Jewish boy had his Bar Mitzvah at which time he became an adult Jew and assumed full responsibility for obedience to the Law. Likewise, Christian youth are often confirmed on Pentecost and enter into full membership with the church in terms of adult responsibilities and privileges.

Symbols of Pentecost

The color for the Day of Pentecost is red. It is the color of fire, for the Spirit came in tongues of fire. The fire represents God, "the consuming fire." God the Holy Spirit comes to the disciples. The fire represents, moreover, warm hearts, fiery zeal, dedication, and devotion. Also, red is the color of blood, and represents the blood of the martyrs which is the seed of the church. The color for the Sundays after Pentecost is green, a color of growth. It is during this season that Christians are to grow in the Spirit.

A dove is associated with Pentecost as a symbol of the Spirit. When Jesus was baptized, the Spirit came upon him in the form of a dove.

The number seven is identified with Pentecost, because the Spirit brings the sevenfold gifts of the Spirit. In church symbolism, these sevenfold gifts are portrayed as seven lamps, seven doves, seven tongues, and a seven-branch candlestick.

Customs of Pentecost

In the Medieval period it was the custom in some churches to let a disc with a dove painted on it fall from the ceiling upon the congregation below. This symbolized the coming of the Spirit upon the people. Often this was followed by throwing red roses upon the people to symbolize the water of baptism falling on them. In thirteenth century France, white pigeons were released during church services. Some families followed the custom of suspending a dove over their dining tables.

Trumpets were used during the worship services to indicate the Spirit's coming as a rushing, mighty wind as happened on Pentecost.

In England, on the day after Pentecost, religious plays were produced and "Whitsunale" was sold. Churches and universities made and sold ale to raise funds for the poor or to repair buildings.

In the northeastern part of America "Pinkster" was celebrated on Pentecost. The word came from the German, *Pfingsten*, meaning "spirit." It was an occasion for frolic, fun, and much drinking.

The Mood of Pentecost

1. *Celebration.* Pentecost has the mood of joy because the promise of Jesus to send the Spirit was fulfilled and the gift was received. Thus, the Council of Nicea in A. D. 325 banned kneeling and fasting on Pentecost. Pentecost has the joy of new members received and sinners coming to repentance. It is the joy of a birthday party, for it is the birthday of the church.
2. *Gratitude.* Christians are grateful on Pentecost for the Spirit and his sevenfold gifts. The Spirit brings life; he calls, enlightens, and gathers believers into the church. Since the church is the product of the Spirit, Christians are grateful on Pentecost for the church as the mother of their faith.
3. *Hope.* Hope results from the Spirit's making all things new. Pentecost is renewal and revival day in the church. The Spirit is renewed in the faithful. Pentecost is more than an observance of a great event in the past but is a repeatable experience here and now. With the Spirit comes new life and hope.

ADVENT MEDITATIONS

Those who are used to the normal run of spiritual books and meditations may have to adjust themselves to a new and perhaps disturbing outlook. These meditations were written by a man literally in chains, condemned to be executed as a traitor to his country in time of war. They are completely free from the myopic platitudes and insensitive complacencies of routine piety. Set in the familiar framework of seasonal meditations on Advent, these are new and often shocking insights into realities which we sometimes discuss academically, but which are here experienced in their naked, uncompromising truth. These are the thoughts of a man who, caught in a well-laid trap of political lies, clung desperately to a truth that was revealed to him in solitude, helplessness, emptiness and desperation. Face to face with inescapable physical death, he reached out in anguish for the truth without which his spirit could not breathe and survive. The truth was granted him, and we share it in these meditations, awed by the realization that it was given him not for himself alone, but for us, who need it just as desperately -- perhaps more desperately -- than he did.

These meditations were written in Advent of 1944. Defeat for the Nazis was already certain. Hitler alone refused to see it, and was still receiving lucky answers from the stars. Father Delp had long since refused to accept the collective delusion. In 1943 he had joined the secret discussions of the Kreisau Circle, an anti-Nazi group that was planning a new social order to be built on Christian lines after the war. That was all. But since it implied a complete repudiation of the compulsive myths and preposterous fictions of Nazism, it constituted high treason.

Father Delp was tried in a trial that was a show, staged by a specialist in such matters...Father Delp was singled out as one of the chief villains, and in his case, the prosecution smeared not only the prisoner but the Jesuit Order and the Catholic Church as well. The prosecution also tried to incriminate them in the attempted assassination of Hitler the previous July, but this was obviously out of the question and the charge was dropped. This was plainly a religious trial. The crime was heresy against Nazism. As Father Delp summed it up in his last letter: "The actual reason for my condemnation was that I happened to be and chose to remain a Jesuit." (He might well have said, "Because I chose to remain a Christian.")

Father Delp had no hesitation in evaluating the choice of those who, in the name of religion (as many had) followed the Nazi government in its policy of conquest first and a new world later. He said:

"The most pious prayer can become a blasphemy if he who offers it tolerates or helps to further conditions which are fatal to humanity, which render us unacceptable to God, or weaken our spiritual, moral or religious sense."

What is their value to us in Metropolitan Community Church? Father Delp cared desperately that each of us would respond to an inner need for truth, and struggle to recover our spiritual freedom. He wants us to listen to the voice crying in the wilderness -- to become aware of our devastated condition before it is too late. He begs us to confront God, to face inner solitude and recover mysterious sources of hope and strength. Father Delp believed that we are often blind to spiritual things even when we think we are seeing them: and indeed perhaps most blind when we are convinced that we see. We are surrendered, too often, as persons to be used

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as "things" and our spiritual creativity has dried up at its source. We are no longer alive with passionate convictions, but centered on our own empty and alienated selves, and we become destructive, negative, violent. We lose all insight, all compassion. Or else our souls, shocked into insensitivity by suffering and alienation, remain simply numb, inert and hopeless. We hope in matter and the power we can gain from manipulation of it. Or else, in abject self-contempt, we believe in our own unworthiness more than in the creative power of God.

Father Delp calls us from traditional "spirituality" or "piety" to the creative unrest of the truly spiritual person. He calls us away from "religion" which has become formal, apathetic, bloodless, and unloving. He calls us to truly please God, by regaining our humanity, to face our desperation, and to stop giving the illusion of holiness and stop concerning ourselves with feeding our own pious souls for our own satisfaction. Father Delp wants us to concern ourselves with freedom, to regain our spiritual health, grow and respond to God. "None of the contemporary religious movements take for their starting point the position of humanity as human beings...they do not help us in the depths of our need but merely skim the surface...They concentrate on the difficulties of the religious minded who still have religious leanings. They do not succeed in coordinating the forms of religion with a state of existence that no longer accepts its values. We need to find out what people need, and to devote" some thought to the question that possibly, in a dialogue with them, they might have something to give us."

The Advent discovery that Father Delp made, pacing up and down in his cell in chains was that in the very midst of his desolation, the messengers of God were present. This discovery was in no way due to his own spiritual efforts, his own will to believe, his own purity of heart. The "blessed messengers" were pure gifts from God, which could never have been anticipated, never foreseen, never planned by human consciousness. In the darkness of defeat and degradation, the seeds of light and hope were being sown. In his Advent meditations, with all the simplicity of traditional Christian faith, and in images that are seldom remarkable for any special originality, Father Delp describes in the ruin of the society around him an "advent" in which the messengers of God are preparing for the future. "Unless we have been shocked to our depths by ourselves and the things we are capable of, as well as the failings of humanity as a whole, we cannot understand the full import of Advent." Father Delp is reiterating St. Paul's realization of our helplessness and God's grace, not as opposed, fighting for primacy in our lives, but as a single existential unit -- sinful humanity redeemed in Christ. Father Delp cries out for Christian liberty and personal dignity -- and yet liberation from fixation on our own subjective needs and compulsions -- recognizing that we cannot fully become persons until we understand our need for community and our duty of serving others.

These meditations are both disturbing and hopeful. There is something mystical about them -- yet the mystic recognized a responsibility to be engaged in political action, and because he followed messengers of God into the midst of fanatical and absurd political crisis, he was put to death. There is a place for the prophet and the mystic in our century. Certainly in MCC, we have been surrounded by both -- and yet by mystics who were not totally outside of society, not removed from the world. This mystic did not reject the world in order to seek his own salvation without concern for the rest of humanity. Nor must we. The freedom seeking person,

may well find that instead of being able to provide words of comfort for the complacent that she or he will have become "a voice crying in the wilderness," and many of us in MCC have found ourselves in that place. We are part of a prophetic church, crying out for the liberation of humankind. If we do not face the anguish of being true prophets, We will have the carrion comfort of acceptance in the society of the deluded by becoming false prophets and participating in the world's delusions. These meditations are a way of becoming involved in the world, of praying for it from within it. As we are within the world, as we are both part of the oppressed and the liberation, as we become responsible for our own and others quest for freedom, these meditations from prison remind us that we are -- willing or not -- the voice crying in the wilderness.

Adapted from the Introduction
by Thomas Merton to The Prison
Meditations of Father Delp

Adapted by Rev. Marge Ragona, MCC-L.A. Christian Education Program

The Prison Meditations of Father Delp, Alfred Delp, S.J. (with Introduction by Thomas Merton) MacMillan, New York, 1963

